Students expose lack of decent, safe, affordable housing

Our correspondents
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The death of 21-year-old University of Sydney student Pingkang "Connie" Zhang in a fire that erupted at the Euro Terraces apartment block in Bankstown on September 6 points to the exploitation and neglect of university students in Australia, particularly international students.

Another young Chinese student was seriously injured after she and Zhang jumped from a fifth-floor window in a desperate attempt to escape from the intense fire. The building lacked fire sprinklers and had other basic safety defects, including faulty alarms, and the two-bedroom apartment had been sub-divided to create a third bedroom.

Australia's major universities each have tens of thousands of students enrolled, but only provide accommodation--at high rents--for a fraction of them. International students, often with no family or other connections in Australia, are compelled to turn to the expensive private rental market. They receive virtually no assistance from the Australian government, and have few rights.

The exorbitant fees that international students are charged by Australian universities, coupled with government-imposed limits on the numbers of hours they can work, are major factors compelling students to move into cheap, substandard and unsafe accommodation.

Over the past three decades, under successive governments, Labor and Liberal, overseas students have become Australia's third largest foreign exchange earner, behind iron ore and coal, generating up to $17 billion annually for education providers, landlords and other business interests. The conditions confronting these students are a graphic example of how the private profit system subordinates the right to decent, safe and affordable housing to the interests of the corporate elite.

Domestic and international students at several universities in New South Wales and Victoria recently related some of their experiences to the International Students for Social Equality, the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party.

Nancy, a second-year media student from China studying at the University of Sydney, lives in a house near the university with nine other international students. She explained: "A lot of international students have to sleep in dining rooms, or kitchens--they do that because it's cheap. The problem is that Sydney rent is very expensive for international students."

Nancy shares a room with another student. Together, they pay $400 rent per week. She said: "One of the problems with sleeping in the kitchen or the dining room is that they often don't have any windows, so if there is an emergency, you cannot escape."

She explained that as an international student, "If you have a part-time job, your wages won't even cover the rent. International students have restrictions on how many hours we can work. Some international students get very low wages. Most international students don't want to get involved in anything that could negatively affect their studies, so they tolerate bad conditions. International students should have the same rights as everyone else."

Nancy outlined the stark choices faced by many international students in Sydney: "You either live close to university and pay very expensive rent but less in travel expenses, or you live far from university and pay less rent, but much more for transportation. If you live close to the university, your room is very small, but if you live far from university, you can have a large single room."

Alvin, a 24-year-old Malaysian student in his final year at Victoria University in Melbourne, highlighted the exploitation of international students by the universities. "I found that the study fees here are very expensive and unfair," he said. "I pay $21,400 per year, but don't receive any student concession rates or government support. They

are making billions of dollars out of us."

Alvin explained that the lack of government support and high cost of medical treatment meant he often did not see a doctor when he was sick. "Last year I only saw a doctor twice," he said. "This is because every time I see a doctor, it costs me $60. So normally, when I get sick, I just take my own medicine." He added: "I used to stay at the University Lodge, but I've moved out because it cost me $1,000 a month."

Yifan, a student from China studying at the University of Sydney, lives in his own room in a six-bedroom house at Auburn in Sydney's western suburbs, far from the main university campus. He pays $120 a week in rent, but commutes hours each day to study. According to him, subdividing existing rooms in apartments is "actually quite common for housing outside the campus. Landlords separate the dining room into separate rooms so that they can lease it to more people."

Yifan commented: "It seems that the government thinks it has nothing to do with them [international students], but I think it could do more on this issue."

Thokgor, a student at Victoria University, arrived in Australia from Africa six years ago and is now a permanent resident. He told us that he looked for work between January and July, but then stopped "because there was nothing."

On the issue of accommodation, Thokgor said: "I live with three other students in an apartment. It's very expensive. Food and bills are getting much higher and wages lower. We each pay $300 per month in rent and another $200 each for gas, electricity and water. We don't have the Internet at home because we can't afford it, so we use the school Internet when we're here. Transport is very expensive to university, and if you don't buy a ticket they will fine you about $200."

Thokgor added: "It's very hard to live in an expensive house. So if you go to an older one, it might not be safe. It's not going to have a lot of the extra safety things—such as alarms. But students can't afford to pay for that stuff."

Thokgor wanted more support from the federal government. "If you're a full-time student, the government needs to give you some support, or at least make sure there are some good part-time jobs available. I receive $400 per fortnight from Centrelink, which is not enough to live properly. Centrelink last year gave me $1,000 per semester to support student expenses, such as books, but they've even ended that … What does the Gillard government want to do? Why are they cutting Centrelink? They're not creating any jobs. They're cutting jobs from government departments. Now I'm studying hard in the hope I can get work, even though when I finish I know I won't get a job … I have a lot of friends who've finished their courses and they can't get a job."

Sanjana, a domestic student from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, noted: "All the major unis are in the city and it's unfeasible for students to live far from the city, so obviously there should be affordable housing for students, especially international students who have limits on how much they can work. They are already paying so much in fees."

Most of Sanjana's friends are paying around $200 per person for a single bedroom in a share house. One of his friends from Japan lives with four other people and works in a restaurant, receiving below the minimum wage. However, she did not dare to complain for fear of losing her job. International students "are living in a foreign country and they don't know what to expect in a job," he said. "It's a lot easier for them to be exploited."

Commenting on the austerity offensive internationally, Sanjana said: "I think all these free market reforms are really hurting everyone, especially the most vulnerable, and the only ones who are benefiting are the rich and the powerful. Without all these social services there is no safety net. Students should not have to struggle for education; education should be a right, not a privilege."

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