

Bankstown apartment fire survivor tells media how blaze began

Richard Phillips
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Chinese student Yinuo “Ginger” Jiang, 27, who was seriously injured after jumping from a window of a burning fifth-floor apartment in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown on September 6, was interviewed by Fairfax Media last month.

Jiang, a University of Western Sydney early childhood education student, broke her hips and ankles, and suffered burns. She is making a slow recovery in Sydney’s Liverpool Hospital, where she has had several skin grafts and six operations to insert metal plates in her joints. She remains traumatised by the fire, in which her friend, Pingkang “Connie” Zhang, 21, died.

Jiang said the two students were with Jianwei “Jason” Zeng, another young Chinese resident, on the apartment balcony in the Euro Terraces Building B, when the electricity suddenly failed and something sparked in an air conditioning fan unit.

“There were lots of big, black tubes behind the air-conditioner,” she told Fairfax Media, “and there was just a ‘boom’ and the fire was on.”

According to Fairfax Media, Zeng tried unsuccessfully to extinguish the fire. But the young man’s Australian visa had expired and he feared that if police came he would be questioned. He left the building, allegedly without shutting the front door properly. The open door created a wind tunnel effect and the blaze quickly spread inside the apartment, igniting a futon bed.

Fairfax Media said that the blaze became so intense that it peeled tiles off the ground and melted concrete walls. Unable to reach the front door, the two young women sought refuge in a bedroom but the smoke was unbearable and they climbed onto an aluminium window ledge, which then began to melt.

Jiang said: “I saw the burns on my right hand and I

just thought, ‘if I don’t jump now, I will burn more places, maybe my face, maybe my back.’ I heard something from my heart: ‘Jump and you can live.’

“I remember Connie climbed out the window first. We didn’t say anything to each other because it was a really emergency situation. We didn’t know what to say to each other because it meant nothing, it can’t help. I just realised that I’m already burnt on my back because of the smoke and the window is the only place I can go.”

While Jiang’s comments, as reported, are brief, they make clear where the fire began—in an air conditioning unit—and how rapidly it engulfed the apartment.

Four months on, residents have been told nothing officially about the cause of the fire. There is still no statement from the New South Wales (NSW) state government or Fire and Rescue NSW about what led to the disaster.

According to Fairfax Media, Bankstown police have only just completed their investigations into the blaze. It remains unclear whether any public coronial inquest will be conducted.

Jason Zeng’s concerns about the reaction to his expired visa were rapidly confirmed. After reporting to NSW police the next evening—and being told that he faced no charges over the fire—he was incarcerated in Sydney’s Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. Five weeks later, he was summarily deported back to China. This was not only a violation of his basic democratic rights, but prevented him from testifying on the causes and circumstances of the blaze.

Euro Terraces Building B, a three-year-old construction, is typical of hundreds of multi-storey apartment blocks being erected in working- and lower-middle class suburbs in Australian cities, generating quick profits for property developers, building

companies, banks and sales agents.

Marketed by real estate agents as having high fire safety standards, the building had several major safety flaws. It had no fire sprinklers, which could have quickly extinguished the blaze, because they are not mandated by the Australian Building Code in residential properties less than 25 metres high. The 10-storey block was designed and built to be 24.92 metres high.

Euro Terraces also had a number of apparently unauthorised modifications, including the addition of an atrium roof and extra bedrooms in some apartments. A fourth bedroom had been added to the apartment that Jiang and her flatmates had rented.

Since the Bankstown disaster, fire and building safety experts and engineers have spoken out about unsafe construction methods. Their concerns have produced no response from any level of government—federal, state or local. Many of these professionals have warned that the de-regulated system, introduced over the past two decades, of permitting developers to hire private certifiers to conduct building inspections, along with other market-driven cost-cutting methods, are jeopardising the safety of apartment owners and tenants throughout Australia. (See: “Building regulations and the Bankstown fire”)

Last November, Bankstown City Council assured Euro Terraces B residents that it was safe for them to move back into their units. Residents were given no information about the safety flaws that had led to the tragedy or the potential danger of the air conditioning units, which were installed when the building was erected.

Air conditioning units and related equipment are known sources of domestic fires. Early last month, around 130 people were evacuated from a NSW south-coast aged care centre, after an air conditioner caused a ceiling fire in the four-year-old building. This week, more than 200 people were evacuated from a shopping mall in Liverpool, a Sydney suburb, after a fire began in ceiling air conditioning unit.

Euro Terraces residents have not even been advised by authorities to have their air conditioning units checked. This response reflects the attitude of governments, Labor and Liberal alike, whose priority is the profit requirements of the property developers, real estate speculators and financial elite, not the health and

safety of working class families.



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