

Australia: Still no inquest into student deaths in Melbourne fire

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In early January 2008, three Indian students—Sunil Patel, 24, Jignesh Sadhu, 24 and Deepak Prajapati, 32—were killed when an intense fire erupted and spread through an over-crowded, unsafe timber home at Footscray in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

Five years after the tragedy, the Coroners Court of Victoria is still considering whether to hold an open inquest. The court had one directions hearing in November and requested further submissions before deciding whether to hold an inquest or simply deliver an official “finding”.

The lack of any official investigation or finding reflects the broader indifference at all levels of government toward the plight of international students in Australia. The only concern of governments has been to prevent any threat to an industry worth up to \$17 billion annually for the Australian economy. International students pay exorbitant fees but receive no significant assistance from any government agency for their basic needs, including accommodation.

The response to the Footscray fire is in line with the official reaction to last September’s apartment blaze in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown that killed 21-year-old Chinese student “Connie” Zhang and seriously injured fellow student Yinou “Ginger” Jiang, 27. Almost six months after that fire, no official inquiry has been announced.

The three young Indian students were burnt to death in Footscray after a computer monitor overheated and sparked a fire in their room in the early hours of January 3, 2008. The blaze quickly spread through the three-bedroom house.

Up to 10 people had rented the small house, which was situated close to Victoria University. They included five members of the Zinzuwadia family, also from India, and, at various times, five international

students. The family had allowed the students to occupy the front bedroom for a share of the rent and other expenses.

Contrary to mainstream media claims that international students are ‘well-off’, many come from lower-middle- or working-class backgrounds. Their families make tremendous sacrifices to send their children to Australia.

Bhavin Zinzuwadia, his wife and daughter survived the blaze. He told Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* in 2008: “They are not only my housemates, they are my friends and family members as well. They were also from families like me ... they were extremely poor. They were young people, their parents had hopes for them ... they were the first ones among their whole family to go out abroad. They could have fulfilled all their dreams.”

The Footscray house was initially rented for \$230 a week, and then \$250 a week. This was more than the Zinzuwadia family’s total income, forcing them to share the rent with the students.

As well as being overcrowded, the Footscray house had suspect wiring and had not been regularly inspected, as legally required, by the real estate agents managing the property. None of the fire’s survivors knew what a smoke alarm was and were unaware if any were installed in the house, or whether they were working.

A recent Tenants Union of Victoria (TUV) submission to the Coroners Court noted: “The dwelling was overcrowded, the power boards were overloaded, there was inadequate electrical circuitry, no electrical safety checks had been conducted and there may not have been any electrical circuit breakers or safety switches or any working smoke alarms in the dwelling. No inspection of the dwelling had been conducted for over two years.

“In addition, all occupants of the dwelling were recent arrivals to Australia, financially disadvantaged and had little to no knowledge about their rights and responsibilities or about basic fire safety.”

The contents of the Indian students’ small bedroom provided a stark picture of their difficult circumstances.

The room contained a double bed and three mattresses on the floor, as well as clothing and luggage, two microwave ovens, a pedestal fan, a desktop computer monitor, a processor and a television signal booster. There was also a laptop battery charger, a fan heater and two electric blankets. Most of the electrical devices were connected to a six-point power board, connected to a single power point in one wall.

Australia’s major universities profit from tens of thousands of international students but provide little accommodation, forcing them into the private rental market, if they have no friends or family. There is an acute shortage of affordable housing, with more than 36,000 households on the Victorian public housing waiting list. International students are not eligible for public housing.

These shortages have driven up the demand for accommodation close to tertiary education institutions. According to a 2011 Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) report, the number of registered rooming houses near a university campus in the state of Victoria, mainly accommodating international students, had grown by over 150 percent in the six months to April 2010.

The TUV submission to the coroner cited instances where 48 Nepalese students were living in a six-bedroom property. In another case, 12 international students lived in a single room.

A DHS June 2012 Rental Report estimated that only 10 percent of dwellings in metropolitan Melbourne were “affordable”. However, the Homeless Persons Legal Clinic commented that there is “no affordable and appropriate rental housing in Melbourne available for single people earning a minimum wage or living on Newstart, Youth Allowance or Austudy or for couples with two children on Newstart [unemployment benefits].”

The TUV stated in its March 2012 *Affordability Bulletin* that a person receiving Newstart renting a one bedroom flat in the Melbourne inner suburbs of Brunswick and St Kilda East would be paying almost

91 percent or 99 percent, respectively, of their income in rent. The TUV also noted: “Even in locations on the fringe of the city such as Sunshine, a person receiving Newstart would still be paying 66 percent of their income on rent for a one bedroom dwelling and paying approximately 73 percent in Dandenong.”

The tragic deaths of Indian students Sunil Patel, Jignesh Sadhu and Deepak Prajapati at Footscray in 2008, and Connie Zhang at Bankstown in 2012 are the product of a social order in which education, housing and every other aspect of life is subordinated to the drive for profit.



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