

Australia: Apartment residents raise fire safety concerns with SEP campaigners

Mike Head—SEP Senate candidate for Queensland
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Residents of a major apartment complex in inner Brisbane, where fire gutted eight apartments on June 9, spoke to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners last week about the harrowing events of that day and the lack of essential fire safety facilities in the building where the blaze occurred.

No-one died in the disaster, but the fire in five-storey H block of the Cathedral Place complex, near the centre of the Queensland state capital, could easily have led to fatalities. Within less than half an hour, residents said, the fire raced from one top-floor apartment to eight units, trapping four people as thick smoke engulfed the building.

Residents described seeing three people screaming for help, trapped on the balcony of a top-floor unit, before they were rescued by firefighters. One of those rescued was a shift worker, who had been asleep when the fire alarms sounded. Another woman was carried unconscious down five flights of stairs.

Media coverage of the fire ceased within several days. Yet many questions remain unanswered about how the fire was able to spread so quickly in the eight-building complex, located in Fortitude Valley, on the edge of Brisbane's downtown business district. About 200 apartment owners and tenants have been forced to find alternative accommodation, with the body corporate announcing that repairs are likely to take nine months.

Cathedral Place was designed to be a "showpiece" up-market development. Erected on former church land, it was personally opened in 1999 by Jim Soorley, then the Labor Party's lord mayor of Brisbane. The complex mainly caters for professional workers in Brisbane city. The 1,600 or so residents also include short-term tenants, some of them young travellers from overseas. The rents are high—as much as \$650 a week for a two-

bedroom apartment with a view.

Yet it seems that Cathedral Place's H block lacked some elementary fire safety protections, including firewalls in the ceiling cavities between apartments, which are necessary to isolate blazes. H block had no fire sprinklers and, as residents revealed, no fire extinguishers or fire hoses.

Dean and Gail, a couple living in H block, described the scene after the fire began at about 4.40 pm. "We just grabbed our keys and evacuated," Dean said. "We thought it was just a drill. Then we watched as three people were caught on their balcony. They were screaming. The smoke was bellowing out." Like other residents, the couple found themselves out on the street with no money and nowhere to stay. "Luckily, we were able to borrow some and book into a motel," Dean explained.

Natalie, a young finance worker, was concerned by how rapidly the fire spread. "I'm just glad no one got hurt," she said. "It could have been worse if the fire had been at night, when people were asleep, rather than in the late afternoon." The blaze had started from something as simple as a burning candle, but "the time between the alarm and the fire really going off was quite limited." She added that some people might have initially thought the fire alarm was a false alert, because the alarms at the complex "go off frequently."

John Telford, a property valuer who owns an H block unit, was horrified to discover that his building had no fire sprinklers, extinguishers or hoses. He pointed to the contrast between the standards in residential and commercial buildings. "I work in an office, on the eighth floor, and it has sprinklers, alarms and extinguishers. Why aren't there even portable fire extinguishers in this building?"

Telford described how the fire expanded from one

apartment, across the top floor units. “Once it got into the roof space, it just travelled horizontally from one end of H block to the other. It was like a roll of newspaper burning to its end. As it went through, each unit was set alight.”

Asked how such a safety flaw could have existed, Telford commented: “They probably just put a fire wall between the individual units, but only up to the ceilings.” He added: “The roof construction seems to be timber, with a metal membrane on top to stop water getting in. So once a fire gets up into that cavity it can just go right through all that timber, which can be really dried out because of the heat of the sun beating down on the roof. Once the fire gets up there, it’s like lighting a match.”

Residents were forced to flee the building so fast that many took no money or possessions with them, Telford explained. He spent the night of the fire at a nearby Salvation Army homeless men’s hostel. “I went up there, saying I’m a homeless man,” he recalled.

Telford, who has considerable experience in the property industry, said he would not blame the developers for any safety defects. “Who approved this building?” he asked rhetorically. In his view, every development proposal had to meet the standards specified by legislation and regulations.

We discussed with Telford the SEP’s investigation into last September’s tragedy in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown, in which one young Chinese student was killed and another was seriously injured after they leapt out of a fifth-floor apartment window in a desperate bid to escape a raging fire.

In that case, relaxed fire safety requirements contributed to the disaster. Building codes and planning laws had been de-regulated over the past three decades, starting with the Hawke Labor government’s introduction of the Building Code of Australia in 1990, to permit “Alternative Solutions” and “innovative” measures to avoid detailed safety prescriptions.

Much remains unknown about how the Cathedral Place project was approved. The concerns voiced by residents, however, point to serious questions about basic fire safety. As with the Bankstown fire, broader political issues are also raised. The near-disaster in Brisbane again points to the incapacity of the corporate profit system, driven by the interests of the developers and banks, to provide safe, affordable and decent

housing.



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