

Australia: Hundreds affected by fire at private university accommodation

A reporting team
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Almost 400 residents of the Uni Lodge apartment building in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Broadway were evacuated at around 4.30 a.m. on Sunday, after a fire broke out. It reportedly originated in an electrical switchbox on the second floor. No one was seriously injured or killed, but three people were treated for smoke inhalation at the scene.

The privately-owned apartments largely cater to international students who attend nearby universities. Zac Hambides, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for the Senate in New South Wales, and members of an SEP campaign team spoke to residents on Monday about the circumstances of the fire, and the housing conditions confronting international students.

Residents explained that they had first been awoken by a fire alarm early Sunday morning, but many of them had ignored it, because false alarms have been a regular occurrence. Only when an evacuation announcement came over the PA system some 10 minutes later did they leave the building, many with only the clothes on their backs.

After evacuating, residents were left to mill around on the street in the cold and rain. It reportedly took staff between one and two hours to account for everyone. Residents spent much of the day in a nearby shopping centre, and were given minimal information by the building's staff, many of whom are also students from abroad. They were only informed at 3 p.m., via the Uni Lodge Facebook page, that they would not be allowed to return to their rooms that night.

Students attending some universities were provided with accommodation, but other students and residents, including owner-occupiers, were forced to find their own.

On Monday, residents were told that only some could return to the building. Those whose rooms were

uninhabitable or continued to suffer power outages, were escorted to collect some possessions and told they would have to find somewhere else to stay.

On Tuesday, the Uni Lodge Facebook page announced that it was not known when the damaged rooms would be habitable. How many rooms were affected by the blaze, and the severity of the damage, is still not clear.

Residents expressed frustration at the lack of information and the absence of alternative accommodation arrangements. Many students were in the midst of exams, while others were set to return to their countries of origin this week.

Thomas, an international student from Britain, explained that he had been lucky to be able to stay with a friend on Sunday night. "I left my phone and my wallet in my room. I've been without anything since 4.30 Sunday morning, so I'm pretty angry. All the staff here kept saying, 'Just check the Facebook page, just check the Facebook page' for every answer. My question was, I don't have money, I don't have a phone, I haven't got anything, so how do I check?"

Thomas raised concerns about the building's fire evacuation procedures. "When you sign up to stay here they give you a sheet of paper with what you should do during a fire but they don't really talk you through it," he said. "Theoretically, the emergency assembly point is in the park on the other side of the shopping centre, but everyone just stopped outside the building or stayed in the lobby. The only time anyone knew it was serious was when the foreman announced it over the PA. Then everyone appeared out of nowhere. We get too many false alarms in this place, so no one takes it seriously anymore."

Thomas contrasted what happened with the procedures where he was employed. "I work in the

hotel industry, which has high standards. We're trained with proper procedures. We even have drills where the fire service will come in and evaluate the hotel's procedures in terms of fire evacuation."

Jess, an international student from the US, said a smaller fire, apparently deliberately lit, had occurred around a year ago. She had an exam on Monday morning, and had not had a chance to collect any of her belongings, or change out of her pajamas when she fled her room. "It's been a hellish ordeal. They're going to have to do something about their policy on fire drills from now on because as you can see it's a big mess," she said.

Another resident noted that the design of the building is "sort of like a rabbit warren, with small corridors" and that this may have made it difficult to extinguish the fire.

The cause of the blaze has not been confirmed, and no investigation has been announced into Uni Lodge's handling of the fire. The incident has highlighted the precarious position of international students, who pay tens of thousands of dollars a year in university fees.

These students are a lucrative source of revenue for the chronically under-funded universities, and education services have become one of Australian capitalism's largest export earners, generating more than \$17 billion a year. Yet they are confronted with a severe lack of affordable student accommodation, and many are forced to enter the expensive private housing market.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost 150,000 international students live in overcrowded houses. Others, who live in apartments owned by corporations such as Uni Lodge—which operates buildings in most of Australia's major cities, totalling over 8,000 beds—pay exorbitant rents.

Students said they had little choice but to stay at Uni Lodge, because of the lack of affordable housing on campuses. According to the Uni Lodge website, the starting price for accommodation at the Broadway apartment block is \$334 a week for a one person "small studio" without air conditioning. Apartments for two people start at \$237 per person per week.

An investigation by the Socialist Equality Party into a fatal apartment fire in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown last September revealed the unsafe and over-crowded conditions in which many international students, as

well as immigrants and workers, are forced to live because of soaring rents and house prices in Australia.

One Chinese student died and another was seriously injured after they jumped from a fifth-floor window to try to escape the intense fire that swept through their apartment, which had been sub-divided to create a third bedroom. The de-regulation of fire safety requirements over the past three decades, contributed to the disaster.

The plight of international students is the responsibility of successive governments, Labor and Liberal, state and federal alike, which have treated them as little more than lucrative cash cows. The expensive and often unsafe accommodation that students face is an indictment of the private profit system, which subordinates the basic social right to decent, safe and affordable housing to the profit requirements of education providers, developers and property owners.

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