

Australian coroner's report points to Labor's responsibility for insulation deaths

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In a bid at damage control, newly reinstalled Prime Minister Kevin Rudd belatedly apologised last week to the families of four young men killed in 2009 and 2010 when working for contractors under his Labor government's \$2.5 billion Home Insulation Program.

The hurriedly rolled out program provided rebates to insulate the ceilings of 2.7 million houses across the country. It was part of the first Rudd government's \$42 billion economic stimulus package, launched after the 2008 global financial crisis as a means of propping up business. Overall, the stimulus package allocated billions of dollars to underwrite the activities of major corporations, especially in the construction and retail industries, and also guaranteed the loans secured by the big banks.

Rudd's cynical apology, more than three years after the fatalities, followed the release on July 4 of a Queensland Coroner's findings into the deaths of Matthew James Fuller, 25, Reuben Kelly Barnes, 16, and Mitchell Scott Sweeney, 22. The coroner's report pointed to the Labor government's culpability for the fatalities.

Two of the young men were killed when firing steel staples to lay electrically conductive insulation material. A third was electrocuted when a steel pole he was using to push insulation into place touched a screw that had pierced a live cable. The fourth victim, Marcus Wilson, 19, died of heat exhaustion while working in a ceiling in over 40 degree Celsius temperatures in Sydney. His death was not part of the inquiry.

In each of the three cases, it was found that the men had not received adequate training or supervision. Two company directors and a supervisor were referred for possible health and safety violations, but Coroner Michael Barnes highlighted the underlying lack of safety regulation. He stated: "The only training

stipulation required of persons employed or subcontracted by an installer to install insulation was that they were to have completed the relevant one day Occupational Health and Safety induction course."

Beside the four deaths, the insulation program led to over 220 house fires, more than 1,000 roofs being electrified and 240,000 dangerous or sub-standard insulation jobs, all with the potential to have caused serious injury or death.

Coroner Barnes found that a major contributor to the deaths was the speed with which the program "was conceived, designed and implemented". He stated: "Because a major focus of this was the stimulation of the economy to counter the effects of the global financial crisis, it needed to proceed far more quickly than [the two-year timeframe recommended by experts], but not at the cost of human life." Put more plainly, young workers' lives were put on the line to meet the urgent needs of big business.

Although Barnes noted that workplace safety was primarily the responsibility of the then state Labor government, he declared it was "reasonable to expect" that having injected billions of dollars into a program to stimulate the economy, the federal government "would have regard to the possible safety implications". He added it was "reasonable to conclude the dangers should have been foreseen before three people died in Queensland and one in New South Wales."

Known dangers were ignored. "While the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage had recommended mandatory specific training for all new entrants into the industry in the planning stages of the program, this did not occur due to the tight timeframe in which the program was to be rolled out."

The haste driving the program had nothing to do with providing decent jobs or alleviating the dire social

position of millions of ordinary people hit by the crisis. The scheme was a component of the Rudd government's pro-market agenda to meet the cash needs of the financial and corporate elite amid the immediate fallout from the 2008-09 crash.

Underlining this is the fact that the insulation program was suddenly terminated in February 2010, just one year after its inception, followed by the government's Green Loans and solar hot water installation stimulus schemes, in the face of intense media agitation.

The media campaign did not start until after the fourth fatality on February 4 that year. Far from being concerned for the lives and safety of the workers employed under the program, the media seized on the deaths to push for a wider shift from stimulus to austerity measures. With its immediate crisis averted, finance capital internationally insisted that the burden of the bailouts be imposed on the working class by slashing public spending, including on housing, health care, education and child care.

Rudd's winding up of the insulation program and other parts of Labor's stimulus package was meant to signal that he that was prepared to implement the required shift. He did not do so quickly enough to satisfy the corporate establishment, however, and that became a key factor in his ouster and replacement as prime minister by Julia Gillard in a backroom coup, orchestrated by Labor and trade union factional bosses in mid-2010. Gillard quickly pledged to cut spending to wipe out the budget deficit.

There is no doubt that the trade unions, as well as the Rudd government, were fully aware that the outsourcing of the home insulation program would see a flood of contractors into the industry, looking for quick profits, and the recruitment of inexperienced young people desperate for work.

From the outset, the unions fully backed the insulation program, claiming that it supported "tens of thousands of jobs" and covered up for the Rudd government. After the first three deaths in 2009, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) initially proposed the program's suspension, but withdrew its call in November 2009, following a government promise to "boost safety and training standards".

Little more than three months later, Michael Sweeny was electrocuted. The ACTU issued no subsequent

statement on the insulation program, and has not commented on the coroner's findings.

The unsafe and oppressive conditions that led to the deaths of the four young men are not an aberration. On the contrary, due to decades of deregulation, privatisation and outsourcing under both Labor and Liberal governments, enforced by the unions, unsafe and unhealthy conditions are endemic in many industries, from construction to hospitality and fast-food outlets.

This situation will continue to escalate regardless of which party takes office after the federal election, with both Labor and Liberal pledged to back the ongoing corporate restructuring that will further undermine safety in the drive to boost profits.



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