

Tragic death of homeless woman in Sydney

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The terrible death of Monika Chetty, a 39-year-old mother of three children, on January 31 is a graphic example of the worsening social crisis in Australia. A former nursing home worker, she had spent several years living destitute and homeless in western Sydney.

Chetty, an Australian citizen of Fijian-Indian descent, died painfully in Sydney's Concord Hospital four weeks after being discovered suffering from serious burns to 80 percent of her body. She was found in bushland next to Ferraro Crescent, West Hoxton on January 3 after a local resident reported a woman calling for help.

It seems that Chetty separated from her husband four years ago, initially taking their two sons and daughter with her. She later rang her husband to say she was homeless and unable to look after the children, who returned to live with their father. From there she fell deeper into misery. She began to live in her car and beg at shopping centres and train stations.

Ordinary people tried to help Chetty, giving her money, food and places to sleep. Residents of Ferraro Crescent let her use their taps and sleep on their verandas. They tried repeatedly to get help for her, but all the relevant authorities proved utterly indifferent.

One family fed Chetty, washed her and bandaged her injuries. A family member told the WSWs of the shock of finding a homeless person living in their street. "In Melbourne and in Sydney city you see it a lot, but to see it here it in western Sydney is really worrying," he said.

The tragedy has deeply affected many people, not only in Australia but also Fiji and India, where Chetty's death has been widely reported. "Rest in Peace" comments have been posted in social media. People, including her classmates from high school days, have expressed their wishes to attend her funeral.

This reaction no doubt reflects a broad sense of sadness, perplexity and genuine concern: how can such a social tragedy occur? What does it reveal about the state of society? If Australia has a welfare safety net, how can a woman be left to die in such awful circumstances?

In the various media reports, however, there is no

suggestion, let alone probing, of the underlying causes—the economic, political and social background. Many facts about Monika Chetty's life and personal circumstances remain unclear. When and how her injuries were sustained is not known. Nevertheless, Chetty's plight undeniably points to deep problems in the existing social order.

In the same week that Chetty died, Treasurer Joe Hockey bluntly warned Australians that the days of governments providing welfare benefits had passed. "The age of entitlement is over, and the age of personal responsibility has begun," he declared.

The Abbott government is preparing for brutal budget cuts in May that will further decimate social services. More broadly, Hockey was sending an explicit ideological message: it is up to individuals to fend for themselves. Society has no role in helping even its most vulnerable members.

But what happened to Monika Chetty was the product of economic and social processes over which she had little or no control. No one chooses to become destitute.

Homelessness is growing in Australia, and its face is also changing. Increasingly, the homeless did not fit the traditional stereotype of single men living on the streets. More and more, their numbers include impoverished working-class families, and women with children, sometimes living in homeless shelters, run-down boarding houses, or cars.

This is the direct result of massive and accelerating job destruction throughout basic industries, the gutting of social services such as public housing, homelessness programs and mental health services, as well as soaring private housing costs and rents, and worsening inequality.

The 2011 census estimated there were already 105,237 people homeless nationally, a 17 percent rise from 89,728 in 2006—a far cry from former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's completely phony 2007 pledge to halve the number by 2020. The Council on Homelessness, an advocacy group, estimates about 44 percent of the homeless are now women and many have children.

Treasurer Hockey was spelling out the increasingly blatant abrogation of social responsibility that already dominates government policy. The Ferraro Crescent residents who tried to get help for Chetty were equally shocked by the official response they encountered. More than a year before she died, one resident called the local Liverpool Council, whose representative simply declared that it was not the council's problem.

One family contacted two homeless shelters. Both said they were unable to take anyone. According to Homelessness Australia, half the people seeking crisis accommodation across the country each day are turned away, including two in three children and almost 80 percent of families.

This is a dysfunctional society in which every aspect of life is subordinated to private profit and, ultimately, the interests of the ultra-rich minority.

Australia is marked by ever more stark inequality. The 50 richest people are now collectively worth \$US101.9 billion, up nearly 50 percent in the past three years. The corporate and financial elite has further increased its wealth spectacularly since the global financial crisis of 2008, at the direct expense of the working class, with a corresponding spread of poverty and unemployment.

Federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, together with big business, are drawing up even deeper attacks on social programs, together with welfare benefits, and jobs and working conditions. This will only increase the immense financial stress on working people and drive greater numbers into social misery, producing more tragedies like that of Monika Chetty.

The authors also recommends:

End the scourge of homelessness

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