

Australia: Overseas students and workers nearly killed in Sydney fire

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When firefighters arrived in the early morning hours of July 2 to attend a blaze at an old factory complex in the inner Sydney industrial suburb of Alexandria, they were stunned to find 18 international students and workers living in squalid conditions.

Fortunately the young residents—four of whom had to be physically rescued from the flames—survived the fire. But their plight again highlights the dangers facing thousands of super-exploited foreign students and workers in Sydney and other Australian cities. The soaring cost of accommodation, combined with onerous education fees and low wages, means that many are living in appalling, overcrowded and unsafe places.

Close to the heart of Sydney, the students and workers, aged in their early 20s, thought to be from Korea, Japan and New Zealand, were living on mattresses at the back of a bus depot in a shipping container, a caravan and a disused minibus, sharing one portable toilet.

Landlord Masaaki Imaeda had advertised the premises on-line as a quiet, comfortable and peaceful environment, with full modern facilities. It was said to be perfect for students because it was close to transport to Sydney University and the University of New South Wales. Rents were quoted as \$130 per week or \$190 for two people.

Firefighters initially thought they were attending an industrial fire and were shocked to find dazed youth emerging from the smoke. More than 80 firefighters were deployed to battle 20-metre flames. “Had the firefighters not realised they were there, they well could have lost their lives,” New South Wales (NSW) Fire and Rescue Commissioner Greg Mullins told the media. Mullins said he was “outraged that there would be something like this in the heart of Sydney.”

It soon became clear, however, that such substandard

and potentially fatal conditions are now prevalent in Sydney, and that the state and local government authorities have done little or nothing to halt the rise of slum landlordism.

A Sydney City Council spokeswoman said more than a thousand reports of “unauthorised” property use and overcrowding had been lodged in the past year alone. At first, the council denied that any complaint had been made about this property but later admitted that Vicki Bonneville, who lost her catering business due to the fire, had lodged a complaint two months earlier.

Fire regulations were strengthened in NSW after the deaths of six young tourists at a Kings Cross, Sydney hostel in 1989, but Commissioner Mullins said the Alexandria site complied with none of these regulations, with no smoke alarms, fire exits or proper sanitation.

Such conditions have been allowed to proliferate even though, since 1981, 29 young people have lost their lives in fires at hostels and other crowded and cheap boarding facilities across Australia.

In September 2012, a Chinese student died and another was seriously injured after jumping from a fifth-floor window to escape an intense fire that swept through their apartment in the Sydney working-class suburb of Bankstown. A Socialist Equality Party investigation demonstrated that the fire revealed the unsafe and over-crowded conditions in which tens of thousands of international students, as well as immigrants and workers, are forced to live because of soaring rents and house prices.

Across Australia, the Bureau of Statistics estimates that 27 percent of international students and 26 percent of new migrants live in overcrowded properties that require at least one extra bedroom. With more than 600,000 overseas students living in Australia, that adds

up to at least 160,000 students, in addition to more than 30,000 new migrants.

Because of chronic underfunding by successive federal governments, universities and other educational institutions increasingly depend on the many thousands of dollars in fees they charge each overseas student. This income is now one of Australian capitalism's biggest revenue streams. On its web site, the Group of Eight—Australia's elite universities—boasts: "This \$15 billion industry is Australia's fourth largest export, following just iron ore, coal and gold."

Despite this revenue, universities and governments have failed to provide adequate affordable housing, instead charging exorbitant rents for the limited number of on-campus units.

Mass media outlets presented the shameful Alexandria premises as a product of an individual landlord's greed, with no social significance. The fact that young people were living in such terrible conditions, however, points to what is increasingly facing their generation, both in Australia and internationally.

Alongside international students—many of whom are also working for low pay to survive—the exploitation of young backpackers on "working holiday" visas has become lucrative for tourism, hospitality and agricultural businesses.

Since the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008, the number of such visas granted has surged by one third to a record 249,231. Young travellers, like their Australian counterparts, are often forced to take jobs in the most exploitative conditions.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program last month, a Taiwanese backpacker, nicknamed Claire, said she was charged \$125 a week and forced to sleep in a room with 25 other backpackers while picking tomatoes in the regional Queensland town of Bundaberg. She was paid just \$7 a day for six hours' work.

Another "7.30" report in May revealed widespread exploitation of young Asian workers in the meat industry. Thousands of backpackers from Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia were being forced to work excessive hours, and paid less than half the official minimum wage.

The shocking conditions uncovered at Alexandria are just the tip of an iceberg, showing how the private

profit system ruthlessly exploits young people and subordinates the right to decent, safe and affordable housing to the interests of the corporate elite.



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