

Australia: High-rise fire investigation reveals cost-cutting endangered lives

Paul Bartizan
6 June 2015

The Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) issued a report at the end of April finding that combustible wall cladding caused the rapid spread of fire up 13 storeys of a residential apartment tower last year. The report is another damning exposure of the deregulation of the highly-profitable construction industry over the past 20 years. Despite this type of wall cladding being illegal under building regulations, there is no system in place to monitor or check compliance.

Just after 2.00 a.m. on November 25 last year, the 23-storey Lacrosse apartment building in Melbourne's Docklands precinct caught fire. Over 400 sleeping occupants were evacuated, while it took 122 firefighters to control the blaze. No-one was killed or injured, but many residents were left homeless for weeks—and some for months as investigations and repairs took place.

The MFB report concluded that the fire started from an unextinguished cigarette in a plastic container on an eighth-floor balcony table. The small fire then ignited the adjacent wall cladding, which in turn created an inferno that jumped up the building's walls and from balcony to balcony. In just over 15 minutes, residents and firefighters confronted a 13-storey column of flame.

The wall cladding that ignited is a composite panel made up of polyethylene sandwiched between two thin skins of aluminium. Exposed to flame, the product is flammable as aluminium melts at 660 degrees Celsius or delaminates and peels off, leaving the polyethylene to burn. The product was fixed to metal sub-framing with double-sided tape instead of the recommended screw-fixing.

Australian building regulations stipulate that external cladding for buildings over three storeys must be non-combustible. The composite panel used on the Lacrosse Building is a product called Alucobest manufactured in China. It had not been tested and certified as non-combustible as required by Australian Standards. It is

roughly half the cost of a similar product, named Alucobond Plus, which has been certified and tested as non-combustible.

Alucobest appears to have been designed to be indistinguishable in appearance from the more expensive Alucobond. It has not yet been revealed if the cheaper product was actually specified from the outset or if it was substituted during construction to cut costs. Either way, the use of this type of lightweight cladding is a fairly recent innovation. Traditional high-rise wall claddings of stone, concrete, masonry or glass are all intrinsically non-combustible but far more expensive.

A 2011 Victorian Auditor General enquiry found that 96 percent of building permit documentation had insufficient detail to determine whether building materials complied with fire-safety standards. Once constructed, few buildings are ever thoroughly checked to ascertain that they conform to all the regulations.

Privatisation of the Building Permit system in 1993 partially deregulated construction. Building Surveyors can be engaged and paid for by the building owner or builder, not an independent state authority. As a result, their power to enforce regulation is constrained by their commercial imperative to get repeat work.

The danger posed by buildings clad with Alucobest was known across the international construction industry. A report in the June 4 *Australian* reviewed a paper presented to a symposium in China, which documented three fatal fires in which the aluminium cladding had caught fire. In two cases, in Beijing in 2009 and Shenyang in 2011, the fires were ignited by fireworks—a deeply alarming fact given the massive fireworks displays held regularly over Australia's major cities.

The MFB report detailed seven other recent high-rise building fires involving the combustible composite panel: in the US, France, South Korea and four in the United Arab Emirates.

The scale of the illegal construction in Australia—and the risk to the lives of the tens of thousands of people living and working in them—remains to be established. The Victorian Building Authority has initiated investigations into at least 170 other high-rise blocks in inner Melbourne alone.

The Lacrosse Building fire revealed a number of other systemic problems. Many residents in Melbourne, like other Australian cities, are forced to share due to the high cost of housing. The median cost to buy a two-bedroom apartment in Docklands is \$595,000. Median rent stands at \$550 per week.

Firefighters reportedly found that some apartments had up to eight beds crammed into the two bedrooms and living area. In the apartment, where the fire started, there were curtains rigged up in the corner of the living area to enclose an extra bed. As is the case in numerous high-rises, the two-bedroom apartments in the Lacrosse Building are only 60 square metres. The second bedroom has no windows.

While the internal corridors and apartments have fire sprinklers the balconies do not, as the regulations assume that there is little to burn on a balcony. The small size of the apartments, however, combined with overcrowding, compels residents to utilise the small balconies as storage space. Many balconies were packed with items that caught fire and contributed to its spread.

Many residents reported that they had not heard fire alarms. Fire investigators discovered that the fire on the balconies spread into the apartment's ceiling exhaust ducts and melted non-fire resistant wiring to the fire alarms, rendering them inoperative.

The fire safety provisions for high-rise apartments also assume that the likelihood of a fire in more than one apartment at the same time is very low. The walls between each apartment and the corridors are fireproofed so that residents can escape and firefighters can extinguish any fire within a single apartment before it spreads. Thus, the building was only designed to supply enough water under pressure to four fire sprinklers.

In the case of the Lacrosse fire, 16 sprinklers were set off as the fire spread up the building. The water pressure proved sufficient to supply all of them at once, in excess of the design criteria. If it had not, the fire could have got hold within the apartments and created the conditions for an inferno that caused catastrophic structural damage.

The response of the trade unions to the MFB report was to apologise for and justify the illegal construction. The national secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining

and Energy Union, Michael O'Connor, asserted: "If you're a builder and you see two different products, one's a lot cheaper using, and you get told it meets Australian standard, you can't blame the builder for going for that product." The construction unions, through their control of the CBUS building workers superannuation fund, have become major property developers in their own right.

In 2012 the Euro Terraces apartment fire in the Sydney working-class suburb of Bankstown led to the death of Connie Zhang and the serious injury of fellow Chinese student Yinou Jiang. A Socialist Equality Party investigation into that fire and the circumstances surrounding it revealed that far-reaching economic, social and political factors contributed to that disaster. These included inadequate building fire safety standards, the increasing de-regulation and privatisation of construction and safety certification processes, and the running down of fire and other emergency services by state and federal governments.

The SEP investigation also revealed the close relations between governments, banks and financial institutions, property developers and building companies, as well as the housing crisis facing students, young workers and millions of ordinary people.

The report on the Lacrosse Building fire confirms all of the SEP's warnings. Despite everything that is known about fire safety and the potentially catastrophic consequences of fires in high-rise buildings, the drive for profit under the capitalist system means that unsafe materials are utilised to cut costs. The system of state regulation is utterly inadequate to identify unsafe construction. The resulting housing is then sold or leased at exorbitant prices, which pressure residents into practices that heighten the risks.

As with every area of social life, it is imperative that the construction industry is taken out of the profit-driven private hands and brought into public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)