

Australia: Three homeless people killed in arson attack

Chris Sadlier
7 March 2017

Three homeless people were burnt to death last week in a disused factory where they were squatting in the inner-western Melbourne suburb of Footscray. The horrific deaths have again focused attention of the dangerous and nightmarish conditions facing thousands of people who are sleeping rough throughout Australia.

Emergency services were called to the rear of the old Kinnear's rope factory at 11.30 p.m. last Wednesday after reports of a fire and explosion. After the fire was extinguished, about 45 minutes later, three bodies were found inside.

Five days later police revealed that two of the victims were a mother and daughter—Tanya and Zoe Elizabeth Burmeister—aged 32 and 15. A third person, a man, has yet to be formally identified but is reported to have been known as Bluey. He had been living in the empty factory for more than a year.

A 52-year-old man, Darren Patrick Clover, who is accused of starting the fire, has been charged with three counts of murder, arson causing death and arson. He allegedly set it alight after dousing the dwelling with petrol purchased from a nearby petrol station. The occupants, who often padlocked themselves into the building to protect themselves from intruders, were unable to escape.

Nothing is known about any relationship that Clover might have had with the three living in the factory and therefore the immediate reasons for the alleged arson. However, the roots of this tragedy lie in the growing poverty and unemployment, lack of affordable housing and inadequate social welfare and mental health care facilities. These circumstances are the outcome of policies imposed over the past three decades by successive Australian governments—state and federal, Liberal and Labor alike—on behalf of the corporate elite that has further enriched themselves during this period.

According to media reports, Tanya Burmeister had a long history of substance abuse and was still a teenager when she gave birth to her daughter. In 2012, after a series of partnerships with violent men, she lost custody of Zoe with

the Department of Human Services (DHS) placing the child in a home with a carer.

Zoe had recently been reported as missing and had gone to the empty Footscray factory to be with her mother. She had just enrolled in a new high school a few weeks before she was killed.

Tania Burmeister's sister Shaylee Tennyson told the media that Zoe's death could have been prevented if the DHS had intervened and put the teenager into secure welfare. She pointed to the rundown of welfare services, telling the *Herald Sun* that she had raised concerns about Zoe's welfare with child protection services on a number of occasions but nothing was done.

"How many families have to go through this before you change your system?" Tennyson said. "It's broken, it's fractured and it's traumatised and it's not working. The procedures need to be overhauled and more staff hired. If it was effective Zoe would still be here in secure welfare, not dead in a squat she was living in."

A nearby milk-bar owner told the Fairfax Media that Tanya and Bluey regularly used the pay phone and ATM at her shop. "They were always nice, here every day. He used to sleep in his car but he had too many fines and the government took it so then he was sleeping in there [the factory]," she said.

It is not clear what motivated the arson attack but the legal aid lawyer for Darren Clover told the Melbourne court that her client needed an urgent mental-health assessment and was a "significant" risk of self-harm. Clover suffered from depression and was on medication, refused to appear at the initial filing hearing, remaining in his cell, and did not apply for bail. The committal hearing will commence on June 9.

A day before the fire, the Maribyrnong Council approved plans for a multi-million-dollar redevelopment of the 3.3-hectare disused factory site. Kinnears, which was established in Footscray in 1903, became the state's largest rope works, employing at its peak about 1,000 people in round-the-clock shifts. It closed in 2002.

The site was sold in 2002 to a property developer for \$8

million and five years later the AXF Group purchased it for \$16 million. In 2012 the Victorian government approved plans for over 1,000 apartments: but construction has never begun. Two years later AXF sold it to another property developer, R&F Estate, for \$60 million.

R&F Estate plans to build up to 1,400 apartments in several multi-storey blocks on the site; reportedly it will be one of the largest privately-owned apartment complexes in Melbourne. The state Labor government has mandated that only 5 percent of these properties are required to be what is officially defined as “affordable.”

According to the latest figures, Maribyrnong and neighbouring Braybrook are the fourth most disadvantaged municipality and suburb respectively in the Melbourne metropolitan area. The official unemployment rate in Maribyrnong is 7.9 percent and in Braybrook 13.3 percent, compared to a national average of 5.7 percent.

The corporate media in Melbourne responded to Wednesday’s attack with feigned concern over the horrific death of the homeless using photographs appropriated from Tanya and Zoe Burmeister’s Facebook accounts and testimony from relatives.

This reportage is thoroughly disingenuous and designed to cover up their own role—the demonisation of the homeless and cover-up of government cutbacks and other retrogressive decisions—in creating the conditions that led to the murders.

The Murdoch-owned *Herald-Sun*, for example, working in tandem with the police, Melbourne’s city council and the state Labor government, has been running a vicious year-long campaign aimed at driving the homeless out of Melbourne’s central business district.

Earlier this year the newspaper published a series of sensationalist front-page stories accusing homeless people of harassment, drug-taking, and faking their poverty. Such has been the media and police harassment that last June homeless people staged a demonstration in the city centre (see: “Australia: Melbourne homeless continue city protest”).

In January, large contingents of police used “move on” powers to shift groups of homeless from busy areas within the city’s central business district. The operation was timed for the beginning of the Australian Open tennis tournament, a significant tourist draw.

The growing homeless crisis is a sharp indication of mounting social distress in working-class areas. The number of people sleeping rough in Melbourne’s central business district has risen by 74 percent in two years, from 142 in 2014, to 247 in the middle of 2016. One welfare agency has reported that eight new people were arriving on Melbourne’s streets every week.

The lack of affordable private accommodation has been exacerbated by the closure of a number of caravan parks and inner-city boarding houses that were bought up by property developers.

State and federal governments have systematically slashed funding for public housing and opened up the market to private developers. As a consequence, there are now more than 32,000 people on the waiting list for public housing in Victoria. This figure, however, would be far higher if it were not for people choosing not to apply due to the lengthy wait involved.

* * *

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the disused Kinnear’s factory last week and also spoke with **Joanne and Alan** at a nearby shopping centre. They were homeless.

“This all could have been prevented if there was just a bit more help for homeless people. Yarra Housing has wiped its hands of everybody. One week [accommodation] in a motel and then that’s it,” Joanne said. Those who died, she added, “have been there for over a year. They had little pot plants out the front.”

Commenting on what faces the homeless, Alan said, “We’re grateful for any help but basically we’re just left alone. We’re on the list for rehab and we’re considering private health insurance but we don’t even have a house to live in. We’re all just a pay cheque away from homelessness.”

Letensie, a nearby neighbour, said she was woken by the fire brigade. “I came out when they were already putting water on the fire and there was a lot of smoke,” she said. “This is very tragic. It was a very small room where they lived. It is an open place; it is not a house or anything. I sometimes saw them sitting there outside and they sometimes came here and took water from our tap.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact