

Australian governments continue to cover-up unsafe buildings

Richard Phillips
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After the June 14 Grenfell Tower disaster in London, Australian authorities offered crocodile tears for the victims and promised action over flammable cladding on buildings across the country.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, backed by opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten, declared that federal and state governments would initiate a national audit of buildings. Turnbull said a Senate inquiry into “non-conforming building products,” originally established in 2015, would expand its investigations. State governments claimed they would identify unsafe buildings.

These promises were an attempt to deflect the concerns of people living or working in what is estimated to be thousands of fire-prone and unsafe buildings in major cities.

The official cynicism is underscored by the fact that only a handful of flammable-clad buildings have been identified. These include the Royal Women’s Hospital and Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre in Melbourne and the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane.

Asked yesterday about the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Queensland Health Minister Cameron Dick contemptuously declared: “Every building in Queensland has combustible material in it. We have to determine what is the risk. The PA Hospital has stood there for 17 years. It is a concrete building that has cladding around it—it’s quite different to the Grenfell situation.”

Other structures previously identified by a Victorian Building Authority investigation in 2016 have been deemed “safe to occupy” by state government or municipal authorities, despite many building owners failing to implement compliance orders.

No-one residing in dangerous premises has been evacuated and provided alternative accommodation. No builder has been charged for using flammable aluminium cladding, or for falsifying material safety documents. According to recent testimony to the Senate hearing, these practices are rampant.

Victorian Planning Minister Richard Wynne ludicrously insisted that a Grenfell-type disaster is not possible because Australia has “the best building codes of any first-world

country.”

Such claims are false. Governments—federal, state and municipal, and from every political stripe—are not only aware there are thousands of unsafe and defective buildings. They have created the conditions for their existence.

During at least the past four years, firefighters, building engineers, strata management bodies and others have issued reports warning that flammable cladding and other unsafe building practices are “rife” and a major disaster is inevitable.

These warnings and the obvious lessons from two serious fires—one in 2012 at Euro Terraces in Bankstown, Sydney and the other at the Lacrosse apartment block in Melbourne’s Docklands area in 2014—have been wilfully ignored by government authorities.

In the Bankstown fire, a Chinese student was killed and her friend seriously injured when an apartment caught fire. A 2015 coroner’s inquest said the young woman would not have died if there had been sprinklers. The multi-storey building was just 10cm less than 25-metres high and therefore did not legally require sprinklers.

The coroner called on the New South Wales (NSW) government and Australian Building Codes Board to change building safety laws, including to make sprinklers compulsory in all new multi-level residential premises. He also called for a new system of fire safety checks so certifiers were properly qualified and independent of developers and builders.

These appeals fell on deaf ears. In October 2015, Australia’s High Court instead ruled that an apartment owners’ corporation in Sydney could not sue the Brookfield Multiplex company for major construction defects. The judges asserted that the company had no “duty of care.”

The NSW government then introduced retrospective legislation that undermined the ability of owners to sue over building defects, by slashing “building warranties” from six years to just two.

One month later, a near-fatal fire erupted at the Lacrosse building in Melbourne. The blaze engulfed one side of the

aluminium-clad 23-storey apartment block within minutes.

The Lacrosse fire was not an isolated incident. Flammable cladding has precipitated fatal blazes since 2008 in France, the US and the Middle East.

Three years on, the Lacrosse building is still occupied and the dangerous cladding remains in place. The deadline for its replacement is not until next July and the apartment owners, not the construction company, are being forced to pay.

In April last year, Strata Community Australia denounced the Senate inquiry for “dragging the chain.” The peak body, which represents apartment and housing unit residents, urged the parliamentary parties to produce a plan within 100 days to stop the use of flammable cladding and other non-compliant products.

The statement received no official response.

Testimony to the Senate inquiry over the past week, from firefighting and emergency service authorities, engineers and strata corporations, has provided further evidence of poor building laws and safety practices.

Last Friday, Federal Safety Commissioner Alan Edwards admitted that his agency had no resources and had not conducted a single building materials’ audit in the previous seven months.

Yesterday, Fire Protection Association of Australia CEO Scott Williams told a hearing that hundreds of aluminium-clad buildings under-25 metres tall presented the greatest risk, because they were not legally required to have sprinklers. Other experts said faulty sprinklers and forged safety documentations were widespread.

Australian authorities, assisted by the construction trade unions, are fully responsible for thousands of people, owners and renters alike, facing the risk of a Grenfell Tower-type catastrophe.

Following World War II, state governments built and administered large-scale affordable public housing schemes. Consecutive Labor and Liberal-National governments systematically abandoned these schemes in the 1990s on the demand of the property, construction and real estate companies. Building safety was deregulated and inspection privatised under the banner of removing “red tape.”

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) national secretary Dave Noonan this week told the media that union members “don’t want to be complicit in building buildings that later could catch fire and potentially kill people ... If that means banning [flammable cladding], then ban it we will.”

Despite the years of warnings and previous fires, however, the unions have taken no action to prevent the use of flammable cladding. One significant factor is that the unions have lucrative interests in the building and property market, including through investments from the \$16 billion CBUS

superannuation scheme.

Federal and state governments continue to insist they will act on Senate hearing recommendations. The three-year inquiry, however, has yet to issue a single finding and its deadline has been extended six times in the past two years. There is still no clear end-date.

Two weeks ago, the federal government met with state housing and construction ministers, who agreed to set up flammable cladding taskforces.

Little credence can be given to these taskforces. Victoria’s will be headed by former Labor deputy premier John Thwaites and ex-Liberal premier Ted Baillieu. Both presided over the development of the Docklands area and building deregulation that enabled non-compliance to flourish.

Irrespective of the evidence presented to the Senate hearings, the governments will do everything possible to block the necessary steps being taken to make buildings safe. The primary concern of the political establishment is protecting the profits of the banks and corporations, and preventing any collapse of Australia’s speculative real estate market.

The Grenfell Towers disaster and last week’s deaths of three people in a Honolulu apartment block are not accidents, but crimes for which capitalism is responsible. They further reveal the utter incapacity of the profit system to provide one of the most essential social rights—safe and affordable housing—to millions of working people.

Workers, students and youth are clearly confronted with the need to organise independently of the trade unions and other agencies that defend the profit system. New broad-based organisations of political struggle are required which will involve residents, building workers, firefighters, safety engineers and other sections of the working class. Only then will the real situation in apartments, units and homes, as well as office blocks, schools and health facilities, be laid bare, those responsible exposed and action taken to rectify the safety breaches.

Everything that has been revealed, both prior to and since the Grenfell Tower disaster, testifies to the need for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies that meet social need, not the profit interests of a wealthy elite. The major banks and conglomerates, including the large construction companies, must be expropriated from their corporate owners and placed under the democratic control of the working class.



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