

Fire risk in most New Zealand high-rise buildings

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The June 14 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which killed at least 80 people, has exposed the life-threatening conditions in which millions of poor and working class people are forced to live in Britain and throughout the world.

The cost-cutting and negligence that led to the Grenfell disaster are rampant in New Zealand. As in Britain, property owners, construction companies, suppliers, local councils and successive governments have been complicit in flouting regulations to cut costs and maximise profits.

The government's assurances cannot be trusted. Building and Construction Minister Nick Smith told the media the combustible aluminium composite panels that contributed to the immense scale of the Grenfell fire were "not prevalent" in New Zealand and had been banned for new buildings from January this year.

This is the same government that has prevented a proper investigation into the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, which killed 29 men, and shielded those responsible from prosecution. Repairs to thousands of damaged homes overseen by the government insurance agency EQC following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake failed to comply with building standards.

In fact, the dangerous cladding has been available for at least a decade in New Zealand and the extent to which it has been used is not clear. On June 30, the Auckland Council said it would review the safety of 90 buildings with the cladding it had identified in the city, a process that could take several months. So far only two buildings have been named—the Nautilus and Spencer on Byron. The council claims these have other features, including sprinklers, which make them safe.

There are many other fire risks. On July 7, Radio NZ reported that "there is widespread industry agreement that most [multi-storey] buildings have weak points that

could accelerate the spread of a big fire and shouldn't have been signed off as compliant with the Building Code."

Fairfax Media reported that patients in Christchurch Hospital are at risk of dying from smoke inhalation because of holes in fire protection walls. The District Health Board claimed it was repairing the walls.

Ron Green from the Association of Building Compliance said he had seen hospitals and rest homes with inadequate fire barriers. He had been "shouting about" this for a long time and "the Grenfell disaster, as horrible as it is, has made people aware that things can happen."

In April 2014, Green told the *NZ Security* magazine that "99 percent of the buildings I inspect don't comply with the Building Code and less than 10 percent will be only 60 percent compliant." The article noted there was "no requirement for contractors or sub-contractors to be trained in the installation" of passive fire protection (PFP) systems, such as fire and smoke barriers, "and no compliance checking for fire stopping."

A 2008 study of 11 high-rise buildings by the Fire Protection Association found that more than half did not meet the Building Code, primarily because of breaches in smoke and fire barriers.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment dismissed these warnings in 2014. A spokesperson told *NZ Security*: "We're aware of some issues but nothing suggests a widespread or endemic issue that needs to be dealt to in particular."

But Home Owners and Buyers Association (Hobanz) president John Gray told Newstalk ZB on June 15 that all the large building complexes that Hobanz had assisted owners with "have suffered from the lack of proper fire rating and fire protection." He said Hobanz had "grave concerns" about residents' safety.

Gray blamed the failings on “willful negligence on the part of the designers, builders and certifiers... These weren’t mistakes... It was a willful and deliberate act to save costs.”

He explained: “We’ve seen building Warrants of Fitness being issued [by council inspectors] and all the boxes being ticked and yet there are glaring omissions in relation to the protection of penetration through cladding, and even the lack of operable smoke detectors and fire alarms.”

Another widespread problem was the lack of “intumescent coatings ... to delay the deformation of the steel [in a fire] so that the building doesn’t immediately collapse.”

The absence of meaningful enforcement of regulations was highlighted by a recent radio NZ report that the Sky World building received a Warrant of Fitness from Auckland Council in January 2016 despite having “multiple defective or broken smoke alarms, smoke detectors, and smoke extraction systems.”

The seven-storey building, housing several shops, a cinema complex and food court, is visited by two million people per year. Auckland Council, which is dominated by the Labour Party and its allies, identified problems with the building in mid-2015 but allowed it to continue to operate.

A Dangerous Building Notice was issued in December 2016 after owner James Kwak refused to make the necessary repairs. The council stated: “In the event of fire, injury or death to any persons in the building or to persons on other property is likely.”

Despite this finding, Sky World was not shut down. It was ordered to take precautions, including employing extra security guards, until the faults were reportedly rectified in May this year.

The fire danger in residential buildings is compounded by overcrowding caused by soaring house prices and rents. Speculation by rich investors has driven up prices for houses, which now sell for more than \$NZ1 million on average in Auckland, the largest city.

In 2013 it was estimated that more than 41,000 New Zealanders are homeless, while in Auckland alone 6.6 percent of houses and apartments—33,000—are officially classified as empty. Thousands of people are crammed into expensive rental accommodation, including slum-like boarding houses. In many cases, whole families

share the same room.

Successive National and Labour Party governments have deliberately run down public housing for low-income people. Today there are about 64,000 houses owned or managed by Housing New Zealand, compared with 69,928 in 1992, despite the population increasing from 3.5 to 4.5 million. There have been reports of people becoming ill and even dying as a result of cold, damp state houses (see: “New Zealand toddler’s death linked to run-down public housing”).

The National government is currently privatising state housing in parts of the country. The opposition Labour Party has criticised the sales but not proposed a significant expansion of public housing to address the homelessness crisis. The ruling elite and its political parties have no intention of spending the billions of dollars required to repair unsafe buildings and ensure that everyone has access to safe and decent housing.

Attend the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) public meeting, “The Grenfell Tower disaster: A crime against the working class” on Sunday, July 30.



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