

“You have to be rich to have a voice”

SEP meeting attendees speak on the Grenfell Tower tragedy

Our reporters
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A diverse layer of workers, students, young people and retirees attended the recent series of Socialist Equality Party meetings, entitled “The Grenfell Tower disaster: A crime against the working class.” A number of them spoke to WSWS reporters about the parallels between the fire in London and unsafe building practices in Australia, the growth of social inequality and the need for a socialist movement of the working class.

In Sydney, **Jacob**, a social sciences student at Macquarie University, said: “I didn’t know much about what had happened to the victims of the Grenfell fire, so it was very interesting to hear they have been abandoned by the government.”

“Capitalism is trying to push workers back to the era before the Russian Revolution,” Jacob said. “The whole concept of ‘social murder’ that Friedrich Engels raised more than 150 years ago is as relevant today. None of the inherent contradictions of capitalism have changed, so revolution is still possible.

“The discussion on how workers, through a lack of consciousness, are funnelled into using existing institutions like class action lawsuits, charitable organisations or official inquiries was really eye opening,” Jacob said. “Workers are discouraged from taking independent political action and are instead directed to these existing institutions that reinforce capitalism.”

Sarah, a 19-year-old business student said: “I was really shocked that the warning signs were ignored. The authorities had heard numerous complaints from firemen and the residents of Grenfell Tower that the situation people were living in was dangerous.

“What happened with the London fire could happen anywhere, including Australia. The responsibility for this situation lies with the authorities who are supposed to

ensure safety for residents. They are not interested in people’s safety.”

Robert, a building maintenance worker, spoke about how homeowners were being forced to pay to repair building defects. “If cladding is unsafe, for instance, then the owners’ corporation has to take the builders to court, then they say it’s the fault of the manufacturers,” he said. “The responsibility is just passed on, and at the end of the day, it falls on the owners’ corporation to fix things, which is very costly.”

Robert said: “They don’t have government regulation anymore.” He recalled that in the late 1990s, councils used to have their own civil engineering departments, that would scrutinise buildings for faults.

Now, Robert said, “a proposal comes in, and then it goes to the professional firms to get a tick of approval and then the council allows it to proceed. The warranty periods for superficial and structural issues are being cut short. Anything that’s deemed defective after six years, it’s up to the owners’ corporation to fix.

“Through work, I know of a building in Mosman where the owners’ corporation is removing dangerous cladding. But they have money. People out in the west don’t. They spend their life savings getting a mortgage to buy an apartment. They can’t afford to pay a levy to rip everything out and fix it.”

Karen, an office worker, who is unable to work because she suffers a disability, said she attended the meeting because of “the treatment of the people from Grenfell. They haven’t got a roof over their heads since the fire, they’ve been ignored. The wealthy do not care about what we go through.

“There are empty apartments in London and here as well. They’re just sitting there waiting for investment prices to go up and there are more and more homeless

people.

“If people lose their jobs, they won’t be able to pay off their mortgage and they could end up homeless because of something completely out of their control. One big company could go bust and thousands of people will be thrown to the wayside. Not everyone has something to fall back on.”

In Melbourne, **Zinaida**, a former Ford worker who lives in Coolaroo, told the WSWs that she has been affected by the recent fire at a major recycling plant. “There was too much smoke,” she said. “You couldn’t see anywhere and the smell was very bad. It caused itching of the eyes. I have a disabled son. The GP had to give him drops for his red eyes. I think they should close the recycling place down.”

Adelle is a Masters research student in the arts. She said: “The Grenfell fire was horrendous. As soon as I saw the footage of the area I could tell that it was lush. I remember noting that the area seemed affluent around it, and the outrage and the pain in people’s eyes. There were children everywhere, refugees and migrants.

“It was public housing, so I knew this situation would not be quickly resolved, that it was a major social crisis. I was outraged. I thought: What if this happened here? The more I followed it, the more I realised that we weren’t going to find out anything, that it would keep being deferred by the government.

“I had heard about the Coolaroo fire from my brother, who is a plumber and drives around in different areas. What’s not being discussed is how many people are affected. They lump all the poor people into these areas.”

Peter, who works in residential construction development, told the WSWs: “I know that the material that was in question at the Grenfell Tower, the flammable cladding, was also an issue on a number of sites in Docklands [a central Melbourne residential-commercial district]. We can see manifested in the Grenfell tragedy the results of materials that are purchased and are supplied solely on a cost basis alone, with no concern whatsoever for the risk for ordinary residents. It’s just tragic what’s happened.”

Asked what his reaction was to first seeing the Grenfell Tower disaster, Peter replied: “I just knew that it was going to be the cladding material, or I was 90 percent sure that the material was going to be flagged as the accelerator, the reason for the fire’s intensity.”

In Brisbane, Melissa, and A.J., unemployed young women from Inala who were attending their first SEP public meeting, spoke to the WSWs.

Melissa said the meeting was “very interesting,” especially when it discussed the fact that “no one has their own voice anymore, because it’s all controlled by the government, the rich people and the media, with all their cover-ups.”

Melissa explained: “The Grenfell fire was not a one-off event. They are going to keep doing this stuff. The media tells lies. I don’t know why we can’t be told the truth, because everyone deserves the truth.

“The media and the politicians just want to cover up and pretend everything’s OK. It’s all to benefit themselves, to make more money, to make themselves rich, while everyone else is just scum to them.”

Discussing the illusions created that improvements can be made within the capitalist order itself, Melissa commented: “Labor has been in office in Inala for decades, but that has not made things any better. They are all in it for themselves, and not anyone else. Everybody has to come together, so we can have a voice, not just those who have money.”

Melissa spoke bitterly about the difficulties of finding work and the constant harassment of Centrelink, the federal government’s welfare payments agency. “Employers don’t want us because we are over 22, so they have to pay us a proper wage. Centrelink is always on our backs, and it’s the same for all young people. It is really frustrating. They threaten to cut us off our benefits if we don’t go for 15 job interviews in one week. I don’t want to be a slave to the government.”

A.J. commented: “The cladding was put on the building to make it look pretty. The fire shows that our safety is disregarded. It only matters if it’s the rich. It doesn’t matter if it’s the people who don’t have over a million dollars. You have to be rich to have a voice.

“Ordinary people no longer have a voice. The truth needs to get out. We all have a right to a job and a life, and to be happy and not to be controlled by a system.”

She concluded: “The government doesn’t care about us at all. We just get poorer, while they get richer. Socialism means equality for all and respect for all. It means accepting that a person is a person, regardless of race or gender.”



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