

Meetings in Australia and New Zealand discuss international significance of Grenfell Tower disaster

Our reporters
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Over the past two weeks, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) has held well-attended public meetings in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, the country's most populous cities, on the international significance of the Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London. The Socialist Equality Group, which is fighting to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in New Zealand, held a meeting in Wellington on Sunday.

The meetings, entitled "The Grenfell Tower Disaster: A crime against the working class," were attended by a broad cross-section of students, workers, young people and retirees. Several audience members had professional experience in the construction and safety industries, and were motivated to attend by their concerns over the consequences of deregulation, including the gutting of safety standards on Australian buildings.

A video from the *World Socialist Web Site*, presenting a timeline of the Grenfell fire, was played at each of the meetings prior to the main report.

The video reviewed the warnings by residents over a number of years that a catastrophic fire was inevitable. These were suppressed and ignored by the authorities. It documented the culpability of successive governments, Conservative and Labor alike, which have imposed sweeping cuts to firefighting services, and eroded building regulations in the interests of the major property developers.

James Cogan, the SEP's national secretary, addressed the meeting in Sydney on July 23.

Cogan began with a quote from Friedrich Engels, one of the founders of scientific socialism, which outlined the concept of "social murder." He explained that this term applied to the fire in London, which had claimed at least 80 lives, and potentially hundreds more.

"The residents of Grenfell Tower were placed, by the conscious decisions of the British ruling class and political establishment, in such a position that it was inevitable they would face the prospect of being killed or injured in a

devastating fire," Cogan said.

The speaker placed the tragedy in the context of the massive growth of social inequality over the past four decades, and the austerity offensive of the ruling class in every country.

Cogan reviewed indices of this process in Australia, including the record low percentage of national gross domestic product going to wages, the poverty-level conditions imposed on the unemployed, and the mounting housing crisis facing millions, which has been spurred by rampant speculation in the property market.

Cogan explained that Labor and the trade unions had played the central role in enforcing the privatisation of state-owned assets, including health, education and housing, the gutting of regulations across industry, including in construction, and the assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

He reviewed the parallels between the Grenfell Tower fire and similar developments in Australia, and noted that flammable cladding, similar to that which fuelled the fire in London, is extensively used in Australian construction. There are estimates that up to 2,500 buildings in New South Wales alone have been fitted with it.

Cogan referred to concrete examples, including the Lacrosse fire in Melbourne in 2014. Flammable cladding on that building has still not been removed. He also outlined the circumstances of the Euro Terraces fire in Bankstown, Sydney, which killed one young woman and seriously injured another. The building was not fitted with sprinklers, as a result of lax regulations introduced by the former state Labor government, and individual apartments had been illegally modified.

All of these incidents were expressions of the conscious subordination of the needs and lives of working people to the profit dictates of the major banks and corporations. Cogan explained that the Grenfell fire had demonstrated that class, not race, gender or sexuality, is the fundamental

division in society and emphasised that the deepening social and political crisis of world capitalism would propel the working class into struggles of revolutionary dimensions.

In this context, Cogan reviewed the way in which the British establishment had sought to divert widespread anger over the fire into the safe channels of an official inquiry, which would amount to a whitewash of successive governments and the major parties.

A central role in this campaign, he pointed out, was being played by Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, who falsely claims to be a socialist in order to subordinate workers and young people to the official parliamentary establishment. And the various pseudo-left tendencies were bolstering Corbyn, while seeking to present the Grenfell fire in racial terms.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party and the world Trotskyist movement, were fighting to make the working class conscious that its struggles could only go forward on the basis of a revolutionary program, directed at the reorganisation of society in the interests of the vast majority, not the profit interests of a tiny elite. Cogan called on those who agreed with this perspective to join the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.

The report provoked a lively discussion. One audience member recalled the SEP's campaign against Telstra's exposure of working class residents in Sydney's west to asbestos, while it was "remediating" phone-line pits in 2013. Another asked about the complicity of the trade unions in the gutting of building regulations.

A student from Macquarie University asked how the pseudo-left could be combated by socialist-minded workers and young people. In response, Cogan explained that it was necessary to disclose the class orientation of every political tendency, through a meticulous examination of its history and program.

Cogan reviewed the ICFI's warnings, over many years, that Greece's Syriza, the "Coalition of the Radical Left," was a capitalist party that would betray the working class. These were vindicated in 2015, when Syriza formed government by capitalizing on mass hostility to PASOK, the Greek equivalent of the Labor Party. Syriza rapidly betrayed its election-pledge to end austerity, and has imposed the deepest social spending cuts in Europe.

At the meeting in Melbourne, Will Morrow, a leading member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth wing of the SEP, delivered the report. He outlined the health crisis caused by a string of fires at a recycling plant in Coolaroo, in Melbourne's working class northwest. As a result of the actions of the Labor-dominated council and the environmental authorities, the plant had been allowed to pollute a densely populated working class area,

jeopardising the health and safety of residents.

Questions were raised about the SEP's attitude to the upcoming Victorian state election, the mounting danger of world war and the implications of Google's moves to censor the WWSWS. Lively discussion ensued on all these issues.

In Brisbane, questions were asked about why the flammable cladding was placed on the Grenfell Tower building, what could be done to overcome the media coverup of the disaster and whether further details of the crime against the working class would emerge, despite the official whitewash.

The reports and discussion were warmly received, with a number of attendees expressing interest in learning more about the SEP and joining the party. Over \$2,500 was donated in collections at the three meetings, while those in attendance purchased several hundred dollars of Marxist literature from Mehring Books.

In New Zealand, Tom Peters, a leader of the Socialist Equality Group, delivered the main report to an audience of workers and unemployed people in Lower Hutt, Wellington. Peters explained the parallels between the Grenfell Tower disaster and New Zealand's Pike River mine explosion in 2010, which killed 29 men, as well as the deaths of 115 people in the collapse of the unsafe CTV building in the 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

The disasters followed decades of deregulation by successive governments, which have allowed buildings and workplaces throughout the country to become death traps. The trade union bureaucracy helped pave the way for the Pike River explosion by remaining silent about the life-threatening conditions in the mine. Years later no one has been brought to justice, while the government and police have prevented re-entry and an investigation inside the mine.



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