

Australian Socialist Equality Party National Secretary James Cogan addresses Grenfell Fire Forum

Our reporter
13 November 2018

On Saturday, James Cogan, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, spoke at the Grenfell Fire Forum about the international implications of the fire. He argued that the same conditions that led to the deaths of 72 people in London's Grenfell tower on the night of June 14 and the early morning of June 15, 2017, exist all over the world.

The event, sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party (UK), was attended by local residents, including campaigners against social cleansing in London.

Cogan brought condolences from the Australian SEP "to all those who lost loved ones and friends in the Grenfell Fire," as well as political support for the forum and its "campaign to ensure that the lessons of what the SEP in the UK rightly characterised as social murder are learned and politically acted upon by the working class internationally."

"The horrific event that took place on the night of June 14-15, 2017, both shocked and resonated with tens of millions of people around the world," Cogan said.

"I have heard it said many times that such a catastrophe should not have happened in the centre of one of the wealthiest cities on earth. And while that is true, the political and social reality is that it did happen.

"As the staggering dimensions of the official disregard for the safety of working-class residents in London became known, it became obvious that, under other circumstances, a fire engulfing an entire apartment building and taking the lives of dozens, if not hundreds of people could have happened, and still could happen, in hundreds of cities around the world."

Cogan explained that, just as with Grenfell and many other UK buildings covered in highly flammable

cladding, which enabled the fire to spread so rapidly, many residential structures in Australia are encased in non-fire resistant aluminium composite panel cladding (ACP, or aluminium composite material, ACM, in the UK).

He said that a secret briefing note from the New South Wales' Department of Planning and Environment leaked to the *Australian* newspaper in mid-February 2016 "estimated that there were between 1,800 and 2,500 high-rise buildings with ACP cladding in metropolitan Sydney alone—that is, not including the sprawling working-class suburbs."

A survey of just 170 high-rise buildings with ACP cladding in central Melbourne and surrounding suburbs found that 51 percent had non-compliant combustible material. In the Gold Coast area there are, Cogan said, "hundreds, if not thousands, of buildings clad in the most flammable forms of ACP." According to building engineers, up to 10,000 buildings in Australia could be covered in flammable cladding.

Cogan reported that, as in Britain, in Australia "national and state governments have rejected any responsibility to carry out inspections. It has been left to the owners." Legislation was written to favour "developers and builders from having to replace flammable cladding," he said. "Again, it is left to the owners. In numerous cases, the owners are wealthy investors who do not live in the buildings. They have refused to either have the buildings checked, let alone replaced cladding or addressed other fire safety issues."

He pointed to the recent BBC documentary *The Fires that Foretold Grenfell*, which established that "warnings about the dangers of ACP have been raised since 1970s." Repeated recommendations that

flammable cladding be banned were “buried and ignored.”

Cogan spoke of the devastating fire that took place in November 2014 at the 23-storey Lacrosse apartment building in Melbourne. The fire “ignited the ACP cladding and jumped from balcony to balcony on one side of the building, engulfing the upper 13 storeys within 15 minutes.” The only reason it “did not result in significant loss of life is the wind direction on the night,” while, “internal fire sprinklers were all that prevented fire from spreading inside apartments.”

“Building regulations in Australia have been written to enable developers and construction companies to avoid having to install sprinklers,” he explained. “Any building under 25 metres is deemed to be ‘low enough’ not to require them. The height stems from the early 1900s. Fire-fighting equipment at the time could only reach 25 metres.

“The consequences were seen in September 2012, with the fire at the EuroTerraces residential block in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown. It was built to the precise height of 24 metres and 90 centimetres and had no sprinklers. Two young women, Chinese students, were trapped by the flames” and were forced to jump to escape. One died, the other suffered life-long crippling injuries.”

Meanwhile, in working-class suburbs, Cogan noted that “most apartment buildings have been deliberately built just below the height of 25 metres. In many cases, they are also covered in combustible cladding.”

“As has been thoroughly documented in the case of Grenfell, the cost of using the most fire-resistant cladding was minimal. The cost of installing sprinklers was minimal. The cost of ensuring adequate maintenance was minimal.

“That is the case in buildings around the world. Decisions are made that the risk to life is justified to lower the costs, and boost the profits, of developers, builders and landlords.”

Such indifference to “the lives of the working class permeates every aspect of capitalist society. ... In their workplaces, people often confront appalling disregard for safety and are pressured to keep silent out of fear of losing their job.”

It is now established that the authorities covered up the extent of the toxic pollution that covered the local area after the Grenfell fire. This is, Cogan said, part of

everyday life for workers the world over. “It is overwhelmingly working-class communities that have been left to live with the legacy of contamination caused by decades of unregulated industrial operations, in which toxic substances were used and polluted the soil.”

He argued that “the great question in politics is always, What is to be done? How is society to be changed?” Cogan noted that after World War II, out of fear of revolution, the ruling class internationally enacted reforms and “here in Britain, they even declared that the welfare of every person would be guaranteed by capitalism from ‘cradle to the grave.’”

For a few decades, Cogan explained, living standards and social conditions did improve, but for the last 40 years, all the underlying contradictions of capitalism have resurfaced. The claim of the Labour Party and trade unions that capitalism could be reformed and made compatible with the needs and interests of the working class has been exposed for what it always was—a lie. The lesson of history, and the lesson from the Grenfell Fire, is that capitalism cannot be reformed.

Cogan concluded: “The task at hand is to build the international political movement that is fighting to unite the working class of the world into a common struggle for socialism, for the end of capitalism. That movement is the Fourth International, led by the International Committee.”

Cogan’s report prompted a lively discussion. Dessie, who had worked in the Grenfell Tower creche for years and had been involved in helping survivors, said she had noticed “a rush of programmes on TV making out that the working class has almost ceased to exist. But the truth is we do run the cities like London.”

Agreeing with Cogan’s remark, Dessie said, “We’ve got to start to do things for ourselves.”

At the meeting’s conclusion, Cogan was given a warm round of applause.



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