

Evacuated Opal Tower residents in Australia express anger and dismay

Our reporters
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Residents of Opal Tower in Sydney continue to live in hotels and other accommodation after being evacuated following the discovery of large broken concrete panels in the building. Some 51 of the 392 apartments were declared unsafe on Christmas Eve, and the entire complex emptied on December 27. A 10-day evacuation was extended by a week to this Friday when an initial engineering report on the cause of the structural fault is due to be released.

On the “Opal Tower Sydney Residents” Facebook group, renters have reported that some landlords are insisting that they continue to pay rent and refusing to allow leases to be broken. Under the Residential Tenancy Act 2010, tenants are only allowed to terminate a lease if the property is deemed uninhabitable.

In some cases, landlords have agreed. One resident commented: “With the advise [sic] of fair trading, I broke my lease with immediate effect and without penalty.” The person stated that they had been told they would still get access to the food and accommodation allowances provided by the builder to evacuated residents.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to other residents on Saturday.

Harbik, 21, from India, said: “My apartment was one of the 51 evacuated on Christmas Eve. When I returned there was a huge crack in the ceiling, so I am very scared to go back and stay there. There will always be an element of fear for me. I will be moving out and looking for a new apartment. My friends and house mates are back in India, so all the responsibility is on me. I have two or three days to get all my belongings out. I moved in four months ago and the rent is \$1,000 per week for a three-bedroom apartment. Fortunately I will be getting back my bond [normally four weeks

rent].

“The developers are just playing a blame game. We still don’t know what the problem was or if there are any other problems. They are not giving us any guarantees. That is why all the residents of the building are moving out. There are many people who are not getting back their bond and are not allowed to leave. If half of the structure has been damaged, how they can ask the other residents to stay there? I seriously don’t know what they are thinking.”

Amartya moved to Sydney three months ago to study, and rents in Opal Towers. She told WSWs reporters: “We’ve been moved to a hotel nearby, but our college is starting on Monday so we came back to get some stuff. We would like to move out, but we have a contract that goes on till June and our real estate agent won’t let us out of it because they say our floor has not been affected and the building is going to be deemed safe.”

When asked how the real estate agents know the building will be deemed safe, she said: “We were told we could move in on January 6, then they pushed it to January 11, but they don’t even know what’s wrong with the building. We paid around \$4,000 for the bond and if we leave, we would lose that, among other things, and there would be a hefty cancellation fee. There are five of us in a three-bedroom apartment and a lot of our friends in this building are facing the same situation.”

When asked her views on how such a situation could have happened, Amartya said: “It just means the government isn’t as strict as they are supposed to be, or someone is corrupt and they got this building passed. It opens up a lot of questions about the other buildings that are being built, and about government regulation.”

Aishwerye, 20-years-old, lived on the 14th floor of

Opal Tower in a two-bedroom apartment, paying \$600 per week rent. She is an international student from India and has been in Australia for only four months.

“I came back from a Christmas lunch on December 24 and I came to the building and could not enter. That night, the 24th, I had to find alternative accommodation. I’m a student and I had to stay with a friend. I didn’t have anything on me because I could not get into the building. I literally had to borrow my friend’s clothes and things like that, and that was on Christmas Eve.

“The next day, they allowed us back into the building. When we reached our apartment, we realised the door has been jammed because the walls have moved and literally compressed it altogether. We had to call in two locksmiths, not one. All on our own. It was Christmas Day. We got no help from the building, and no help from the builders. I have not been reimbursed for the \$400 it cost just to open the apartment.

“We know that there is a problem, but we don’t know what exactly has caused it. All we get to know is through the media.

“For my apartment, the landlord has agreed to return our bond money, after they are allowed access to make a final inspection to make sure I haven’t done any damage to it.

“I’m from Mumbai, which has an apartment culture. I live in a 30-storey apartment there. In a country like Australia, for this to happen, is very shocking.”

Arya, 20, lived on the 26th floor of Opal Tower in a two-bedroom apartment, paying \$630 per week in rent.

He said: “I think that housing is a social right. It should be safe at least. This [Opal Tower] is a very huge building. If it fell down, it would not only cause damage to the people in the building but to the people all around.

“The apartment is not cheap at all. And we thought Australia was a paradise. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get this thing right. We’re international students and we just came four months back. This was our first house. There’s no direction and we don’t actually know what to do. If there are people that are gathering together and saying ‘this is the way forward’ and ‘this is the way to fight,’ then I am willing to fight.”

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