

Australia: Another Sydney apartment block evacuated over major structural cracks

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Hundreds of Mascot Towers' residents in Sydney's inner-south were suddenly ordered last Friday night to evacuate their apartments because of major structural cracks. The 10-year-old complex has two eight-storey buildings with more than 120 apartments. Cracks were discovered in a corner at the edge of one of the buildings earlier in the week and extra bracing failed to rectify or stabilise the problem.

Many residents were given two hours or less to get out with some only hearing about the directive from neighbours and others. The event further underlines the escalating crisis in housing and apartment building and the cost-cutting methods used during the more than two-decade housing boom in Sydney and other Australian state capitals.

The evacuation comes six months after residents of the brand new Opal Tower high-rise apartment block in Sydney's Olympic Park were forced to leave their apartments on Christmas Eve last year (see: "Opal Tower structural flaws expose rot in Australian construction industry"). Some of those residents are yet to return to their apartments as repair works continue.

While 70 percent of Mascot Towers' residents were reportedly informed on Thursday that they might have to leave their homes sometime in the future, on Friday evening all apartments in the two buildings were suddenly declared to be unsafe.

The evacuation was chaotic. One resident told the media that she received an official letter at 7 p.m., informing her that she had to be out of the building by 9 p.m. She was told to "just get all of her stuff and leave."

Residents were given no alternative accommodation but simply told to stay with family and friends. Some news outlets reported that the nearby Mascot Town Hall would be used for emergency accommodation, but

there is no indication that any residents stayed there.

A notice to residents said that the cause was "due to the stability of a structural supporting beam in the carpark area that has been deteriorating over the past 4–5 days. At present there is sheer cracking of the transfer beam, which is concerning to the structural integrity of the building."

Questions of "structural integrity" refer to the building's ability to stay upright. Fire brigade authorities told a press conference that there would not be a "catastrophic failure or collapse," but the sudden evacuation indicates there are real concerns this might happen. Residents from 62 of the apartments will now be allowed escorted access, if they have made an appointment.

Fabiano, one of the residents, told the WSWs that his wife found out about the evacuation from neighbours when she was out walking their dog. They just managed to get their pets and clothes from the apartment and only had 30 minutes to remove their cars from the basement carpark. Police would not let them re-enter the building to collect other things.

The couple had to leave in such a rush that Fabiano left his wallet in the apartment, the lights remain on and he only has the clothes on his back. Like others, they were forced to stay with friends and were trying to find alternative accommodation over the weekend.

Fabiano, who owns a construction company doing remediation work on other new buildings, bought his apartment three months ago. He said there were some pre-existing minor issues with the building, but a body corporate report said this would be overcome with an expansion joint, which allows for natural movement in the building. He said rectification of this problem had begun last week and bracing placed in the building, just under a swimming pool in a second-floor plaza next to

the building.

Fabiano also explained there were unresolved water problems in the basement, which lies below the water table and requires continuous pumping out of the building. While this practice is not unusual, the same issue would potentially affect all the structures in the area where dozens of multi-story apartment complexes have been constructed in past decades. The area is an alluvial plain and was once swamp land, just north of Botany Bay and Sydney's major airport.

While there is much speculation about what precipitated the structural cracking, the actual cause will require an engineering investigation. This, like the inquiry into the construction problems at Opal Towers, will take weeks. Residents will not only be forced to find and pay for alternative accommodation, but will be liable for substantial rectification and repair costs while attempting to keep paying the mortgage on their now devalued properties.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian was asked at a press conference whether her government would assist the now homeless residents. The Liberal Party premier ignored the question and cynically declared that "The NSW government will hold everybody to account, that's our role."

The state government will wash its hands of any responsibility for shoddy and unsafe building practices and do nothing to assist Mascot Towers' residents. The NSW state government's only response to a 2018 report into the building and construction industry, released in February, was to announce a "Building Commission" to oversee government regulations. It is yet to be established.

Consecutive Liberal and Labor state and federal governments, with the complicity of the Greens, the construction unions and mainstream media, have been silent or done their utmost to cover up the cost-cutting methods that dominate the multi-billion dollar building industry.

While Engineers Australia responds to each new revelation about dangerous work practices and use of sub-standard and unsafe products by repeating calls for major changes to inspection and certification in building and construction sector, these appeals have been ignored.

Pointing to the extent of the problem facing the more than two million people now living in apartments,

Owners Corporation Network spokesman Stephen Goddard told ABC News that 80 percent of all new apartment buildings in Australia had structural defects.

"Anybody looking to purchase in a building less than 10 years of age is foolish because the defects will not have yet surfaced," he said. The Mascot Towers building, he added, "will become toxic, just like Opal, where you won't be able to sell out of it because people know of the structural defects." Goddard called for legislation to force developers and contractors to sign a statutory duty of care on the buildings they sell.

The hundreds of Mascot Towers residents now rendered homeless are the victims of the construction, finance and real estate industries which have reaped billions of dollars in profits during Australia's more than 20-year property boom. Now under conditions of falling property values and the collapse of the property bubble, the residents and owners will pay the price for these unsafe building and certification practices allowed by federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, and the construction unions.



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