

New Zealand hostel that caught fire described as “death trap”

Tom Peters
17 May 2023

More details are emerging about a fire at Loafers Lodge in Wellington, New Zealand, which killed at least six people shortly after midnight on Tuesday. The bodies were still in the building as of this morning.

Police yesterday announced that they are investigating the deadly blaze in the 92-room, four-storey building as a suspected arson. Inspector Dion Bennett confirmed reports of a couch fire about two hours prior to the main fire, and police were seeking to verify if there was any link.

They also expect more deaths will be confirmed as the burnt-out areas of the building are accessed. Up to 20 people remain unaccounted for.

One resident who escaped, Mark, told Radio NZ yesterday: “What we didn’t realise at the time is how quickly the fire just went through the top floor, rapidly, like it was an explosion almost, and we think there was some sort of accelerant. So we’re pretty sure that someone did it deliberately.”

Whatever sparked the fire, however, it is clear that the unsafe condition of the building contributed to the scale of the tragedy. One former resident told *Stuff* that when she lived at the hostel in 2013, “she had no access to the stairwells with her swipe card and felt scared when a small fire broke out in the third-floor kitchen.” She described the building as a “death trap.”

Simon Hanify, who survived the fire, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that escape was made more difficult because the front door had been out of order for three weeks, with a sign saying, “door broken, use side entrance.”

Some residents have reported not hearing smoke alarms. Others say there were frequent false alarms in the building, which confused people during the fire. The building had no sprinkler system, which would certainly have saved lives.

Speaking with the media yesterday, Loafers Lodge director Greg Mein refused to answer questions about the building’s condition, saying: “The day-to-day running of the business is done with the management team.” Manager Marie Murphy has not spoken publicly.

Mein added that the hostel had passed a Wellington City Council building inspection in March, and there were additional monthly inspections by fire technicians, all of which raises questions about the standard of regulation. The law does not require such buildings to have sprinklers.

Loafers Lodge is one of many boarding houses across New Zealand that are essentially dumping grounds for thousands of people who cannot afford soaring private rents and are unable to access public housing. Its residents included low-wage workers, formerly homeless people, unemployed and elderly people, as well as people with disabilities, and deportees from Australia.

Residents have spoken of the lodge being infested with bed bugs, and small rooms that were rented for \$260 a week. One woman, whose father had recently lived in the building, told *Stuff* that “the lift would break down at least once a month, and sometimes it would not be working for several days in a row.”

Wellington City Missioner Murray Edridge, whose organisation worked with some of the lodge’s residents, told the *New Zealand Herald*, “You wouldn’t stay there unless you had very few options.”

Displaced survivors who lost everything in the fire have been moved to other temporary accommodation and are suffering severe trauma. Hemi Lewis, who has multiple health problems including breathing difficulties, told Radio NZ that his doctor believed his lungs were further damaged in the fire.

He said: “I have nightmares... I’m alone, I have nothing, [I’m] in a small box, it reminds me of a prison. I have none of my stuff, I’m in a foreign place.” Hemi has been unable to contact his family in Australia since losing his bank card in the fire.

Labour Party Prime Minister Chris Hipkins and opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon, as well as Green Party co-leader James Shaw (who is part of the Labour-led government) have all voiced sympathy for victims of the fire. They have vowed to support investigations into building standards.

The entire political establishment, however, is responsible for the country’s housing crisis that is forcing vulnerable people into places like Loafers Lodge. Low taxes, low interest rates and other policies have fuelled rampant speculative activity in the housing market as well as soaring social inequality.

Wellington rents have gone up by a third in the last five years under the Labour government. In January, according to Tenancy Services, the Wellington and Otago regions had the highest median weekly rent in the country at \$620, while in Auckland the figure was \$600.

While the government frequently declares that it is building more housing, the number of applicants on the waiting list for state housing more than quadrupled from 5,353 in June 2017 to 24,080 as of March 2023. More than 100,000 people are estimated to be homeless or in severely substandard housing—about 2 percent of the population.

At the end of April there were 3,396 households, including 3,393 children, living in government-subsidised “emergency housing,” which includes motels and facilities similar to Loafers Lodge.

In the 2017 election, Labour campaigned with promises to end the housing crisis by building 100,000 “affordable” homes under its Kiwibuild scheme. To date, only about 1,700 of these houses have been built, in partnership with private developers and sold at market prices beyond the means of most working people.

The disaster has also highlighted the underfunding and running down of the fire service. In a press conference this morning, Fire and Emergency (FENZ) chief executive Kerry Gregory said 33 trucks and 80 firefighters responded on the night, including two trucks with a 32-metre ladder and a 17-metre ladder.

A second 32-metre ladder appliance, which could have assisted in rescuing people from the roof of Loafers Lodge, has been out of order for many months. Kerry said this did not affect the response to the fire, but added: “We do however... have challenges with [an] ageing fleet: 27 percent of our appliances are beyond their target asset life of 20 to 25 years.” He said it would take “multiple years” to address this issue.

Faulty equipment, along with understaffing and low pay, was a key factor behind two nationwide firefighter strikes last year. One firefighter based in Newtown told the WSWs at the time: “We keep going to jobs where our trucks are breaking down” and he worried that “we can’t rescue people from buildings that we historically would have been able to do.”

Whatever the exact chain of events that led to the Loafers Lodge fire, the Labour government will do nothing to address the social crisis that is the more fundamental cause of the tragedy. Its annual budget, announced today, is aimed at pushing down spending on public services, as part of the ruling elite’s agenda to make the working class pay for the worsening global economic crisis.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)