

New Zealand hostel fire survivor describes unsafe, rundown building

Tom Peters
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Nearly a week after the horrific fire at the Loafers Lodge boarding house in New Zealand, the number of deaths has still not been confirmed. Yesterday, police said the toll was fewer than 10, with five bodies recovered so far from the damaged building in Wellington.

An unnamed man is in custody after appearing in court on Friday charged with arson. Police say more severe charges could be added. Many questions remain about how the fire was started and how it spread.

What is clear is that the hostel, which housed nearly 100 people in 92 rooms on four storeys, was a death trap. It had no sprinkler system, which firefighters say would have saved lives, and only one functional exit. Fire alarms were reportedly faulty, with some residents saying that they only went off in part of the building, and others saying there were so many false alarms that residents had learned to ignore them.

When the fire broke out just before 12:30 a.m. on May 16 on one of the upper levels, it spread rapidly, making it impossible for many residents to reach the stairwell to escape.

On Saturday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Simon Hanify, who had lived in a small room on the first floor of Loafers Lodge for about four months. He said the front door had been “sealed shut for about a month; someone kicked it in.” A notice said: “Door broken, use side entrance.”

During the fire, some people who could not reach the stairwell to the side entrance were forced to jump onto the roof of an adjacent building. Others were rescued from the Loafers Lodge rooftop by a fire truck ladder.

Describing the night of the fire, Hanify said an initial alarm had gone off at 10:30 p.m. Police say someone had set fire to a couch, which was then extinguished. When Hanify heard the second fire alarm two hours

later, he checked and realised there was smoke in the building. Then, he said, “I went around, smashing on all the doors saying: ‘Get out, this one’s real.’ I’ve talked to other people [who say] the alarm didn’t go off on other floors.”

On the third floor, one resident said “he opened his door and he just hit the floor. There was a black wall of acrid smoke, real nasty, poisonous smoke. He crawled to the stairwell.”

Hanify said if someone had not lived in the building long and didn’t know their way around, it would have been very difficult to escape. Several residents “are mentally ill or medicated, or infirm, or old, and they wouldn’t have stood a chance.” He hoped that those killed had “died of smoke inhalation in their sleep without knowing about it” instead of being trapped and knowing they could not escape.

Most of the people made homeless by the fire have been moved to temporary accommodation, and Hanify has been allocated a public housing unit. He praised the Downtown Community Ministry, which has been helping him.

Many have lost everything they owned in the fire, Hanify explained. “I did hear from someone that most things on the first floor should be okay, and they’re secure,” but items cannot be retrieved “until they’ve got rid of all that asbestos and the water that carried it all through the building.”

The building’s residents included meat workers, hospital workers, retired people, people with disabilities, and a number of people recently deported from Australia.

Hanify, who had been homeless before getting a room at Loafers Lodge, said: “I’ve lived in a few [similar places]. We call it the last resort. It’s where you go when you’ve got nowhere else and the only alternative

is a tree or the concrete.

“I was really grateful when I first got in there, because sleeping under a tree in the mud is not that comfortable. I was grateful at first and then the bedbugs started eating the f..k out of me. I have all these scars. There was an infestation of bedbugs.” The property managers had heat-treated his room twice to try and kill the bugs, but they kept coming back.

In addition, Hanify had been concerned about the leaking asbestos roof. “I’m a roofer by trade,” he explained. “They’ve had exposed asbestos with seven panels cut out because there’s a leak from the roof. The water was dripping down into the rooms and they even allowed new tenants in without fixing the roof leak.” He said he believed there should have been “a total re-roof.”

Hanify had observed people doing repair work on the roof leak without protective clothing or masks. “It makes me sick. I don’t want to point fingers but I’m disgusted,” he said.

Because of contamination from asbestos-laden smoke, businesses next to Loafers Lodge remain closed to the public.

Hanify was charged \$280 a week for the room, including power. Others were reportedly charged as much as \$320. “Do the maths for 92 rooms—and they can’t even put a sprinkler system in or replace the roof,” he said.

Building professionals have raised concerns about the fact that Loafers Lodge was able to pass a building warrant of fitness inspection, carried out earlier this year for the Wellington City Council.

An anonymous building inspector told Newshub on May 17 that if a building fails an inspection, the owner can “easily” find another inspector “that is a bit more lax or... not as skilled and get it passed, because the system allows for that. Something needs to be done about this [because] it’s absolutely criminal.” Without changes, he predicted that there would be more tragedies.

According to the Building Research Association of New Zealand (BRANZ), some countries require sprinklers in buildings four storeys and above, whereas in New Zealand they are required only for buildings more than 10 storeys high.

Labour Party Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said he had asked the Housing Minister to “look particularly at

issues of building regulation to see if there’s anything we should be doing at this point.”

This morning, however, Radio NZ reported that laws to strengthen fire protections for high-density infill housing—including townhouses and terraced housing—had been “stymied” just days before the Loafers Lodge fire. On May 4, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment withdrew proposals to raise fire resistance ratings for walls and protections to limit the risk of fire spreading, because of disagreement from some figures in the building industry. Cost was reportedly a factor in the decision not to proceed with the changes.



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