

Trainee nurse killed in Sydney public housing explosion after complaints of gas leaks were ignored

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On Saturday June 1, an explosion destroyed several units in a government-owned townhouse complex in Whalan, Western Sydney. A young woman was tragically killed in the blast and another five people were hospitalised.

A gas leak has been identified as a likely cause, with locals saying they could smell gas in the area for days or weeks before the blast. At least two gas meter faults have been repaired at the property in the past seven months, and public housing residents have said that their previous calls to report maintenance and safety concerns have been ignored by government agencies and contractors.

The deceased woman, Mhey Yumol Jasmin, a nursing student aged in her 30s was found dead under the rubble on Monday, around 36 hours after the explosion. She had been visiting her elderly mother, who lived at the complex.

Jasmin's body was found in what remained of the home's kitchen. She had been on the second floor at the time of the explosion. Her body was retrieved after specialised equipment was used to prop up a large first-floor concrete slab which was perched in a precarious position.

Another victim of the explosion, 74-year-old Hilmi Yucel, told 7NEWS he heard Jasmin calling out for help and tried to reach her, but was blocked by debris. He said: "She was screaming, yelling. I wish I could have helped."

Yucel, who sustained minor head injuries in the blast, said of his attempts to climb to safety: "I (had) to get out. I (tried) to get up once, another piece (came down) on top of me, then (I) fell again."

Yucel said he believed the explosion could have been prevented, and that he had complained about the gas meter and smell to gas company Jemena last year. Another explosion victim added, "You'd make a

complaint and you wouldn't hear anything. Brick wall."

Gail, who lives next door to the Whalan complex, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, "We could smell gas for months and months. We called the gas company out, but they couldn't find anything."

Homes NSW, the government agency tasked with administering social and affordable housing in the state of New South Wales, said in a statement it was aware of two gas meter faults in the Whalan complex over the past seven months, but that these had been resolved.

The agency blithely admitted "We know current response times on maintenance requests have deteriorated."

Gail was concerned that, even after the explosion, housing authorities were showing a shocking level of disregard for the safety of residents. She said: "The housing department said I can come back here. But there's no electricity or gas—you can't have a shower, you can't cook. It's just ridiculous."

Gail's daughter, who also lives in public housing, said, "The department of housing puts a band-aid on things. ... My whole back wall is like a sponge and the moisture is coming through my bedroom. ... Major repairs have to be done, but they've come out and put two little plates on the back wall."

The horrific incident has prompted public housing tenants elsewhere in the state to speak out about the dire conditions of their homes and the difficulties they confront when reporting issues or requesting maintenance.

Andrew Grant, a resident of public housing in Redfern, an inner-city suburb of Sydney, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation he has been smelling gas around his complex for the past eight months. While neighbours had reported the issue, it had not been investigated, as far as he knew.

He said he has reported other issues that have not been addressed: “We haven’t had any hot water in my building for eight days and there are 15 units in my building—three people in wheelchairs, some people in their 90s.”

Grant, who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair, said the lifts in his building were repeatedly out of order and only makeshift repairs were done.

He also reported that it had taken “in excess of 30 callouts,” over a period of eight years, for leaks in his roof to be repaired.

In the past, Grant said, he would receive a follow up call after maintenance was carried out to ensure the job was done properly, but this was no longer occurring.

The NSW Labor government is attempting to cover its tracks after the explosion, announcing that maintenance and repair requests for public housing will be managed in-house from July. The maintenance itself, such as it is, will still be carried out by private contractors.

The horrific explosion in Whalan and tragic death of Mhey Yumol Jasmin was a stark demonstration of the callous attitude of the ruling class towards the most vulnerable sections of the population, including those in public housing.

The gradual running down of public housing is in line with bipartisan moves, currently spearheaded by Labor governments in NSW and around the country, to tear down existing public housing in order to open up vast new profit opportunities. Underlying this is the phoney claim that the deepening housing crisis will be resolved by removing the “red tape” that supposedly constrains property developers.

In inner-city Sydney, the Waterloo South public housing estate is being destroyed to make way for a new development, just half of which will be social or “affordable” housing. While 749 existing homes will be demolished, displacing 2,000 residents, just 900 social housing places and 600 “affordable” homes will be built, with the other half of the new complex to be on the open market. Similar moves are under way in Victoria, with five high-rise public housing towers set to be demolished by 2031.

The privatisation of public housing, kicked off by the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments between 1983 and 1996, has since been continually deepened since in a bipartisan assault at the state and federal level.

According to the Australian Homelessness Monitor, from 1991 to 2021, “social-housing lettings plunged by 42 percent—or proportionate to population, 61 percent.”

Mission Australia said in a January media release, “The

number of households on the waiting lists for social housing across Australia is at 224,326, with those identified with the greatest need increasing by four percent to 106,534 compared to last year’s figures.”

The federal Labor government’s response to the massive shortage is the \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund, established last year. This will supposedly result in “up to” 30,000 “social and affordable” homes being provided over five years—a tiny fraction of what is needed to address the shortfall.

Nothing will be built until at least next year, and the whole scheme is dependent on its alignment with the profit interests of private property developers.

At the same time, Labor governments at state, territory and federal level are overseeing a major cost-of-living crisis. Inflation has vastly outpaced wage growth for more than three years, leaving workers worse off in real terms than they were a decade ago. Repeated interest rate rises by the Reserve Bank, with the backing of the Labor government, have sent mortgage repayments skyrocketing, in turn driving up rents.

The impact is stark in working-class areas like Whalan, and surrounding Mount Druitt, where the unemployment rate is almost twice that of NSW as a whole, and median household income is just two-thirds of that reported across Greater Sydney.

The tragedy in Whalan, and the denial of basic necessities of life to public and social housing residents, is the sharpest expression of this broader war against the working class.

The dramatically worsening living conditions will inevitably provoke opposition, as is emerging in the struggles of workers elsewhere in Australia and around the world, but the essential question is that of perspective. The fight for high-quality housing and a decent standard of living for all requires a struggle against the capitalist system and its subordination of human need to the interests of wealthy property developers and banks.



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