

Charges laid over deaths in New Zealand hostel fire

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New Zealand Police announced on June 5 that three people had been charged with manslaughter over a May 2023 boarding house fire in Wellington that killed five people. A fourth person has also subsequently been charged.

The charges were laid after a two-year investigation into whether the condition of the 52-year-old, four-storey *Loafers Lodge* and its fire safety systems “contributed to the fatal outcome.” Detective Sergeant Timothy Leitch said the people charged were “involved with the management and operation of the building, and police allege they were responsible for aspects of the building’s fire safety system.”

Two men aged 75 and 58, and a 70-year-old woman, appeared in the Wellington District Court facing five charges of manslaughter, one for each victim. They are alleged to have failed to take reasonable precautions and care to avoid danger to life. They face an alternative set of manslaughter charges alleging failure to comply with duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act. The fourth person charged, a 72-year-old man, also entered no plea when he appeared in court on June 9.

The charges are the first of their kind in New Zealand, it being the first time that police have charged anyone involved in maintaining a building with manslaughter. The courts suppressed the names of all four and remanded them on bail until their appearance in the High Court on June 19.

Shortly after the 2023 fire, a 50-year-old man who lived at the boarding house was accused of deliberately lighting it. He pleaded not guilty and is scheduled to face trial in August, charged with five counts of murder and two of arson. His lawyer has indicated a defence of insanity will be lodged.

The five residents who died in the blaze which gutted

the building were: Michael Wahrlich?, 67, a street performer known around town as Mike the Juggler, Melvin Parun?, 68, Kenneth Barnard?, 67, Peter O’Sullivan?, 64, and Liam Hockings, 50.

More than 90 people, many of them long-term residents, were staying at the boarding house when the fire broke out on the third floor at 12:25 a.m. on May 16. About 50 survivors were forced to take refuge at an evacuation centre in Newtown Park. Many lost everything in the fire.

The 92-room lodge was a death trap. It had no sprinkler system, which firefighters said would have saved lives, and only one functional exit. Fire alarms were reportedly faulty, with some residents saying they only went off in part of the building, and others saying there were so many false alarms that people had learned to ignore them. The fire spread rapidly, making it impossible for many to reach the stairwell to escape.

Resident Simon Hanify told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the front door had been “sealed shut for about a month; someone kicked it in.” A notice said: “Door broken, use side entrance.” 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 rooftop by a fire truck ladder. Some residents were, he said, “mentally ill or medicated, or infirm, or old, and they wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

Others spoke of the rooms infested with bed bugs and the lifts frequently not working. Hanify was charged \$280 a week for the room, including power, while some were 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,” Hanify said.

Loafers Lodge is a microcosm of the social crisis affecting ever wider layers of the New Zealand working class. It was home to low-paid shift workers, including

meat processing workers, hospital staff, as well as unemployed and elderly people unable to find affordable housing elsewhere.

Many were among the city's poorest and lived there for lack of any better options. Murray Edridge, from the Wellington City Mission charity, told the *Guardian*: "A significant proportion of residents of the lodge are under our care. This is an absolute disaster. These are people who are inherently vulnerable anyway."

Survivor Alan Potter told the *Post* following the charges: "That's the news I wanted to hear." The 78-year-old has long called for an inquiry into the deadly fire, beyond just charging a man with lighting it. "I believe it's an institutional failure," he said.

Liam Hockings' family released a statement saying: "This tragedy has highlighted serious concerns about the safety and conditions of some accommodation, particularly for vulnerable people in our communities who are often housed in buildings like this..."

"Everyone deserves a safe place to live—regardless of their circumstances—and we urge all those who own, operate, or manage buildings to take their responsibilities seriously. Lives literally depend on it."

The family was still coming to terms with Liam's death. "He would have turned 53 just a few days ago," they said.

While the building's managers are now facing legal consequences, the entire ruling elite, including the previous Labour-led government, bears responsibility for creating both the legal framework and social conditions that allowed it.

Following the fire, Labour's then Housing Minister Megan Wood declared that Loafers Lodge had passed an inspection by the Wellington City Council and "met the requirements of the Building Act." While some countries require sprinklers in buildings of four storeys and above, in New Zealand they are required only for buildings more than 10 storeys high.

The fire was a product of the assault on the living standards of the working class, particularly the basic right to decent housing. Loafers Lodge was one of hundreds of boarding houses that are essentially dumping grounds for thousands of people who cannot afford soaring private rents and are unable to access limited public housing.

In the five years preceding the fire, including during the Ardern-led Labour government from 2017,

Wellington's median rent went up by 33 percent, pushing more people into precarious housing. The waiting list for state housing more than quadrupled from 5,353 in June 2017 to 24,080 in March 2023. More than 100,000 people were estimated to be homeless or in severely substandard housing—about 2 percent of the population.

The situation continues to worsen under the current far-right National Party-NZ First-ACT coalition government, which took office in 2023. Figures released in March showed that the number of people sleeping rough had risen 53 percent in Auckland and 40 percent in Wellington.

Housing First Auckland manager Rami Alrudani told Radio NZ last month that his organisation was seeing "more and more homelessness every day." Last year, the government imposed stricter rules making it more difficult for people to access emergency housing.

Among the government's many anti-working-class policies, there has been a massive tax cut for landlords, including many MPs who are property investors, estimated to have cost \$NZ2.9 billion. The government falsely claimed this would lead to more affordable rents. According to Infometrics, average rent has risen by 2.7 percent in the past year, in line with inflation, to \$575 per week and \$592 in metropolitan areas.

The government is meanwhile moving to water down health and safety regulations. The regulator WorkSafe will be "reformed" to reduce the "burden" on businesses and "rebalance" its focus away from enforcement and towards "advice." More than a hundred jobs have been cut at the agency.

This sets the stage for similar tragedies to the Wellington fire, not only in slum boarding houses but more broadly.



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