

15 years after Christchurch earthquake, families still fighting for justice

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22 February 2026

On Sunday, February 22 a memorial event was held in Christchurch to mark 15 years since the city was devastated by an earthquake that killed 185 people. It was New Zealand's deadliest disaster since 1979 (when an Air New Zealand flight crashed in Antarctica killing 257 people).

Much of the city centre was reduced to rubble and about half of all 170,000 properties in greater Christchurch were damaged in some way. More than 8,000 homes were permanently demolished, with entire suburbs deemed unsuitable for rebuilding, displacing about 16,000 people.

The impact on working people was disastrous. Christchurch rents soared by nearly a quarter from 2010-2014. In March 2013 the government estimated that the number of people either homeless or in insecure housing in the city had doubled from 3,750 before the earthquakes to as many as 7,405.

Tens of thousands of families spent years fighting with insurance companies and the state-owned Earthquake Commission to repair or rebuild their homes. Many suffered significant financial losses.

As of 2023, 1.76 percent of the city's population—about 7,200 people—were still severely housing deprived. A growing number of homeless people are reportedly living in vehicles in the desolate suburbs that were abandoned after 2011.

In a brief social media statement on the earthquake anniversary, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon declared: "Today we remember those who died, stand with the families who still carry that loss, and acknowledge all those whose lives were changed on that tragic day."

In fact, successive governments—including the previous Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern—far from "standing with" victims, have attempted to sweep the disaster under the rug and prevent anyone being held accountable for failures that led to massive loss of life.

While the earthquake was a natural disaster, its human toll was not inevitable. More than half of those who died, 115 people, were killed in the cheaply constructed CTV building, which collapsed in a matter of seconds due to numerous deficiencies, leaving those inside with no chance of survival.

Fifteen years later, despite overwhelming evidence of severe structural defects and non-compliance with building codes, no one has been held accountable for decisions that led to the collapse.

A 2012 royal commission of inquiry found that the engineering firm Alan Reay Consultants Limited (ARCL) failed to properly supervise building engineer David Harding, who was "working

beyond his competence" in designing the CTV building in 1986. It also found that the Christchurch City Council should never have granted a permit for the construction, as the design did not comply with bylaws. Among other failures, the building had "beam-column joint zones ... that were easy to construct but lacked ductility and were brittle in character."

When the building was sold in 1990 the new owners "identified the non-compliance of the connections between the floors and the north wall complex," prompting ARCL to carry out some remedial work. Even after this, however, the connections "remained non-compliant for seismic actions" in the east-west direction.

David Lynch, an advocate for the families of the CTV victims, issued a statement on February 20 which said the anniversary should serve as "a reminder of a preventable disaster and of a justice system that has yet to reflect that truth."

He criticised the decision made by police in November 2017, on the advice of the deputy solicitor-general Brendan Horsley, not to prosecute Reay and Harding for negligent manslaughter. Horsley defended the decision at the time, declaring that prosecution for the deaths of 115 people was not in the "public interest."

Maan Alkai, whose wife Maysoon Abbas died in the CTV building, told the WSWs that at a meeting with several families on December 14, 2017, Horsley claimed the families as "baying for blood" for demanding accountability. Horsley says he does not recall saying these words.

In September 2024, the professional body Engineering New Zealand's (ENZ) disciplinary committee issued a decision which upheld a complaint against Reay. It concluded that "Dr Reay knew Mr Harding lacked the necessary experience to design the CTV building" and that Reay's "conduct fell well below the accepted professional standards in 1986." The organisation imposed a \$750 fine and called on Reay to make a public apology.

Reay, however, continues to deny any culpability and has sought a judicial review of ENZ's finding.

Alkai told the WSWs that the lack of justice was "a huge failure of our legal and justice system in general. The message that this sends to the industry and to young engineers, that essentially you can get away with whatever you do. How can we prevent this from happening again if there is not any accountability?"

"This is not right, for victims to wait 15 years because the offender essentially has a big team of lawyers and has money to keep delaying things. They have no case to prove that he's innocent, so the only way to do it is delays," Alkai said. "The

police investigation, the royal commission, Building and Housing, Engineering New Zealand—they all pointed out that he did not do his job.”

Anita Stewart, whose brother Andrew Bishop died in the CTV building, told the WSWS: “On one hand I would like to move forward and personally grieve our loss in our own private way, and on the other hand I’d like the person who has been proven accountable on many occasions to just accept he’s wrong, apologise and ACCEPT accountability.”

On behalf of the families, Alkasi continues to seek answers about why Reay and Harding were not prosecuted by the police. He has made formal complaints to Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, Attorney-General Judith Collins, the Independent Police Conduct Authority and the current Solicitor General Una Jagose.

In response to Alkasi’s complaint about Horsley’s comment that the families were “baying for blood,” Jagose replied that she had asked Horsley about it and the latter “did not recall” making such a statement. Alkasi told the WSWS, “There were 10 police officers and about 34 family members present” when the comment was made, yet Jagose had not asked any of them about their recollection. Alkasi has submitted a complaint about Jagose to the Law Society.

In a letter to Luxon and Collins in February 2025, Alkasi claimed that Horsley and Jagose had displayed “mistreatment, bias and unprofessional conduct against the victims’ families.” The letter said the families were calling for “a just and impartial review of the CTV case based on the new findings of Engineering New Zealand.”

The letter noted that Horsley’s advice to police not to prosecute Reay and Harding was partly based on an affidavit from engineer Barry Ramsay, who “suggested it was normal practice for engineers not to have their work reviewed.” The 2012 royal commission found that Reay “should not have left Mr Harding to work unsupervised on the design or without a system in place for reviewing the design, either by himself or someone else qualified to do so.”

Alkasi also called for Jagose to be removed as Solicitor General. He noted that the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, released in July 2024, “confirms our concern regarding the integrity of the Solicitor General office when treating victims and their families.” That royal commission, which examined the abuse of children in state-run schools and other institutions, found that “Political and public service leaders spent time, energy and taxpayer resources to hide, cover up and then legally fight survivors to protect the potential perceived costs to the Crown, and their own reputations.”

Jagose, who joined the Crown Law office in 2002, is mentioned numerous times in the 2024 royal commission’s report as someone who played a major role in defending the Crown against allegations from victims. Jagose delivered an official apology which said: “I am sorry that survivors of abuse in care were not always treated with dignity by us lawyers.”

“The problem is Crown Law has really huge authority: nobody questions them, nobody reviews them,” Alkasi told the WSWS.

Based on the experience of the CTV families, as well as the 2010 Pike River mine disaster and subsequent cover-up, Alkasi warned

that the families of six people killed in the recent Mount Maunganui landslide should be wary of promises of official inquiries.

“This could happen to any of us,” he said. “And this is how the government will treat you: they will leave you, as they have with us and the Pike River families, for 15 years, struggling.

“I feel that investigations are just like morphine, to make you sleep and move on. The reason they do these investigations is not really to find out what happened and who’s responsible, to make sure it will not happen again. None of that. It’s just because by the time it’s finished, many other things will have happened and people will forget.”

Meanwhile, future disasters are inevitable, as politicians continue to strip away regulations in order to boost profits for property developers and businesses.

On December 16, 2025, the National Party-led government, supported by every other party including Labour and the Greens, passed the first reading of legislation to remove earthquake strengthening requirements for thousands of buildings. The definition of an earthquake-prone building will be significantly narrowed, reducing the number of such buildings requiring remedial work by around 55 percent, in order to save building owners money.

The CTV building collapse, like the Pike River disaster and countless other avoidable tragedies worldwide, was the product of a rapacious capitalist system that puts profit before human life. The ongoing efforts by the state to shield those responsible from prosecution epitomise class justice, in which a wealthy minority stands effectively above the law.

To prevent future disasters and hold the corporate and political elite to account requires building an independent movement of the working class, fighting for socialism—a society in which production and urban development are democratically organised to meet human need, not enrich a tiny minority.



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