

New Zealand toddler's death linked to run-down public housing

By Chris Ross and Tom Peters
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A coroner's report, released on June 4, found that damp and cold living conditions contributed to the tragic death of Emma-Lita Bourne who lived with her family in a house in Otara, South Auckland, rented from the government-owned Housing New Zealand (HNZ). The two-year-old died last August from a brain haemorrhage as a result of a clot, after being admitted to hospital with a pneumonia-related illness.

Her mother Latisha Bourne had repeatedly asked for help from HNZ to fix the house. "I kept ringing up," she told the media, "Everything in the house needed fixing. We needed carpet, drapes to try and keep the warmth in. There was hardly any sunshine in the house... I'm really angry. What can I do now. It's too late. She's gone."

At the time of her death, one of Emma-Lita's siblings was also being treated for rheumatic fever, a respiratory illness often linked with poor housing conditions. The house had no carpet, only floorboards. The family reportedly used a bucket to catch rain drops leaking from the hallway ceiling. HNZ provided a heater but it was of limited use as the high electricity costs exceeded the Bourne family's budget.

Emma-Lita's death is not an isolated case. On June 9 RadioLIVE reported that 37-year-old Soesa Tovo, father of six children, also died last winter after HNZ ignored recommendations from his doctors to move the family out of its cold and damp home in Papakura. He had been admitted to hospital and treated for health problems affecting his heart and lungs, including pneumonia. Soesa's wife Amelia Tovo said HNZ saw no reason to move them from their cold home even after her husband's death.

The shocking conditions faced by the Bourne and Tovo families are widespread. According to the Child Poverty Monitor released by the Children's

Commissioner last December, more than 40,000 children under 14 are admitted to hospital each year with poverty-related illnesses, often linked to poor housing and overcrowding, such as rheumatic fever and respiratory infections. About 270,000 children, one in four, live in poverty.

Responsibility for this terrible state of affairs rests with successive governments, which have presided over growing poverty and social inequality. The entire political establishment supports austerity measures to impose the cost of the worsening global economic crisis on the working class. Both the current National Party government and the previous Labour government have extracted hundreds of millions of dollars in "dividends" from Housing NZ's funds, while allowing the housing stock to become increasingly run down.

Housing Minister Nick Smith responded with callous indifference to the recent deaths, telling TV3's Paul Henry that HNZ's homes were "substantially better than houses in the private sector" and pointed to a scheme to insulate rental properties. He bluntly declared that "people dying in winter from pneumonia and from other illnesses is not new" and that commentators were "kidding themselves" if they expected the government to "eliminate every case where a person dies from respiratory illnesses."

Speaking to Radio NZ, Finance Minister Bill English absurdly claimed that the government's plan to sell off 8,000 of the 68,000 HNZ houses would result in upgrades and "better services for the tenants." In reality, the investors who purchase state housing will seek to extract profits, either by driving up rents or cutting costs at the expense of tenants. And the money from the sales will not be used to alleviate the plight of the remaining tenants.

The privatisations are part of the government's

long-term agenda to rid itself of the responsibility of providing essential services such as housing, welfare and health care, turning these over to charities, churches, businesses and Maori tribes.

Labour leader Andrew Little responded to Emma-Lita Bourne's death by trumpeting the party's "healthy homes bill", which he declared would "ensure every rental property in New Zealand—whether it is a state house or private rental—meets minimum standards of heating and insulation." Even if such minimal regulations are adopted they will not help struggling families, like the Bournes, who cannot afford heating in winter. Moreover, landlords will inevitably pass on the cost of any extra maintenance by driving up rents even further.

With market rents increasingly unaffordable, more and more families are on the waiting list for Housing NZ, which provides income-related rents. Conditions of overcrowding and homelessness are becoming more rampant, especially in Auckland and Christchurch. In the latter city, thousands of homes were lost in the 2010–2011 earthquakes and rents soared 36 percent from December 2010 to April 2015. Out of 700 HNZ properties destroyed, only 191 have been rebuilt, more than four years later.

Figures from Real Estate New Zealand show that the weekly rent for an average three-bedroom home in Auckland's central suburbs rose from \$590 in March 2011 to \$712 in March 2015. New Zealand's largest city is experiencing a house price bubble driven by rampant speculation and housing shortages. In the past 12 months, average house prices rose 16.1 percent to \$828,502, almost double the average in Wellington and Christchurch. Nationwide, total mortgage debt has almost doubled in the past 10 years to \$200 billion, which equates to 88 percent of gross domestic product.

While the government and opposition have announced policies to boost the construction of houses in Auckland, these will not address the shortage and will create further windfalls for private developers. None of the capitalist parties will advance any measures that would significantly reduce the massive profits being extracted from the housing market.

To divert public hostility over the social crisis, Labour, the Greens and the right-wing populist NZ First have attempted to whip up xenophobia by calling for restrictions on foreigners buying houses. It is not

"foreigners" but the private profit system that is to blame for soaring prices and rents.

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