

Australian workers and youth speak out on Grenfell Tower tragedy

By our reporters
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The June 14 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which is thought to have killed over a hundred residents, has produced widespread shock and anger by Australian workers and young people.

Many who spoke to WSWs reporters over the weekend denounced the conditions that led to the blaze, including the flammable cladding on the building, and the lack of sprinklers and other basic safety measures.

Some drew parallels with the undermining of building regulations by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments in Australia. Media reports since the Grenfell Tower disaster have warned that flammable Aluminium Composite Panels (ACP) cladding is prevalent in the construction industry.

Government authorities, at the state and federal level, however, have done virtually nothing to identify at-risk buildings, let alone take action to prevent a similar disaster. Like their counterparts in Britain, the major parties represent the interests of the property developers and financial entities that have made billions of dollars from an ongoing property boom.

A limited audit in 2014 found that up to 51 percent of high-rise buildings in central Melbourne had flammable ACP cladding. A leaked report by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Planning and Environment last year estimated that up to 2,500 high-rise buildings in Metropolitan Sydney were fitted with ACP cladding.

The Lacrosse apartment complex in Melbourne—the scene of a potentially catastrophic fire in 2014—is among the buildings across the country identified as having ACP cladding. Others include the Royal Women’s Hospital and Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre in Melbourne, and the Foyer Oxford apartment building in Leerdervale, Western Australia, which houses at-risk young people and, possibly, the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, Queensland.

In NSW’s Central Coast, **Jenny** and **Judy** voiced their

concerns. Both are forced to live on poverty-level Newstart unemployment benefits, despite being in their 60s.

Judy said: “When I saw the fire I was devastated and cried. I kept thinking of all the poor children and their parents killed in a terrible death. They could not be helped. It was disgusting. The council ignored the complaints from the residents about the fire hazard. They don’t care about the people, they just wanted them out.”

Jenny, who was recently kicked off disability benefits despite being partially blind, said the fire was an “attack on the working class.” She added: “It’s no different here. That cladding is used all over the world. How many more people will die before they do anything?”

Chris, 29, works in a dry-cleaning plant. He branded the Grenfell Tower fire as a “crime.” He commented: “I was surprised that a building could explode into flames like that, and spread so quickly. It was obvious then that there would be a lot of people trapped that would die. Even the firefighters were surprised and could do nothing to save the people.

“It was a crime because the council knew cheap inflammable cladding was on the building. I don’t think they cared because the building was home for lower-class struggling people.

“It didn’t surprise me when I heard that the council repeatedly ignored the complaints from residents that the building was a fire trap. They did nothing. They were willing to spend money to make the building look pretty because it was in a wealthy part of the city, but they didn’t want to spend money to protect the residents. They wanted the people out of the area. This was an attack on working people.”

In Melbourne, **Georgia**, whose family is from Britain, said: “Austerity will continue to kill, to make the poorest people suffer for the gains of the rich. It is disgusting.

“The cladding on these towers is just the tip of the

iceberg. It has been used on schools and many other buildings.

“Hopefully the anger over this will be a catalyst for something. Capitalism is a global problem. We have to change things by getting involved. I think we need a revolution.”

David, a retired social worker, said those responsible for the disaster should be “brought to justice.” He said: “It’s always the poor or the disabled that get screwed. Both parties that are responsible for the deregulation should be brought to court. Their legislation caused the death of people. It’s a horrible way to die.”

David denounced the response of the authorities to the tragedy, including demands that residents of other at-risk apartment buildings move out with no permanent alternative accommodation. “I was astounded that all these people from other towers are being told not to live there. But where are you going to put them and how would you like to be taken away from your home that you’re used to, and be put somewhere else?”

Valerie, who lives in housing commission flats in Burnley, Melbourne, spoke out against the conditions facing public housing residents. “On this property everything is broken, including gates and doors,” she commented.

“We need a lot done. When you go to tell them [the housing commission] about it, they tell you to ring maintenance. Two months later they might send someone around! They’re not going to fix things. I’ve been here eight years and all my window sills are rotten. They should spend money on safety.

“Those poor people in London didn’t have any money. I feel so sorry. You aren’t safe anywhere. They just won’t spend money on the poor.”

In Sydney, **Sam**, who manufactures fire doors, said one of his friends previously lived in the Grenfell Tower. “After the fire happened he was very upset because he could have been living there,” he said. “He is a very good mate of mine, so it makes you feel bad when your workmate is upset.

“Working in the building-products industry, we use the fire code and I know how to deal with fire doors and fire ratings. If they didn’t check it [Grenfell Tower] properly, how did they get permission to build it in the first place?

“This was a big building so it should have been checked. They have electronic equipment that quickly tells you the fire rating of materials. If they weren’t following the instructions then the government should have cancelled their licence.

“It is a crime to play with other people’s lives and they should be punished,” Sam concluded. “If they are let go then it will happen again.”

Bill, an IT worker in Sydney, said: “It made me sick, just thinking about what happened and also what the government did afterwards—nothing. All those people had no place to go, it was absolutely shocking. It’s the rich and the poor. Big corporations making profit at the expense of ordinary people.

“The authorities don’t know, or they don’t want to know, how many people died. Ordinary people are saying it’s over 100 people dead. It’s indifference and a cover-up. This is a lot worse than the recent terrorist attacks in terms of how many people have died, but the response is completely different.”

Bill said he knew of at least one apartment building in Auburn, a working-class suburb in Sydney’s southwest, fitted with ACP cladding. He also recalled the Euro Terraces fire in Bankstown in 2012, which killed a young Chinese woman and seriously injured her friend. “There was no sprinkler system because the building was just under the required height for them,” he said. “They’d also had problems with the fire safety equipment, the building had failed an inspection.”

Bill commented on the broader erosion of building standards: “If you look at all the new buildings going up in Sydney, including in this area, they don’t check for a lot of things, including water-proofing. Property developers are just putting paint on them, and then the people who buy them have huge costs to fix up all the problems. The councils are not checking on that.”

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