

Australian building experts discuss the Grenfell Tower fire

By our reporters
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Fire damaged ACP-clad Lacrosse apartment building in Melbourne. Photo courtesy of Metropolitan Fire Brigade

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke last week with a fire safety engineer and a building maintenance inspector about the June 14 Grenfell Tower disaster in London and their own experiences in Australia.

Both commented on declining building, product-testing and inspection standards, which over the past 15 years have generated massive profits for developers and construction corporations, as well as windfall tax receipts for governments.

During the post-World War II period, Australian state governments built and administered public housing schemes. These programs were progressively abandoned during the 1990s by Labor and Liberal-National governments. Building industry safety was also deregulated and safety inspection privatised, in line with demands from property developers and the construction industry.

According to a recent Reserve Bank of Australia report, the number of people living in apartments dramatically increased during the past five years. In Sydney, the number of apartments grew by nearly 20 percent from 2012, and these units accounted for one-third of residential building approvals last year. Sydney now has almost half a million apartments, most privately owned. Apartment numbers increased in Brisbane by 36 percent on 2012 levels, and by 30 percent in Melbourne and 20 percent in Perth.

According to Engineers Australia, over 85 percent of new residences are faulty on completion, with fire safety, plumbing and other major problems. Some fire safety authorities told the media after the Grenfell Tower fire that there could be thousands of dangerous aluminium-clad buildings in Australia, but no national

audit has ever been conducted.

Fearing victimisation, the two men did not want to use their real names.

Robert, who has worked in the building maintenance industry for about ten years, said he was shocked by the Grenfell Tower disaster. He described it as a tragedy that “could have been prevented.”

The building was owned by Kensington council, a government body, and it was responsible for the fact that the 24-storey tower did not meet fire safety standards, had just one fire escape and no sprinkler system. “The building is 67 metres high. In Australia any building over 25 metres needs to have a fire sprinkler system,” Robert said.

Commenting on the council’s so-called refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, Robert said: “When you start spending money on a building, why would you care about what goes on the façade of the building? Fire safety is more important. The council should have spent the money on the fire safety and then put something on the façade.

“The government knowingly authorised cladding that could catch fire on the building ... How did they OK this [material] on the building? They didn’t want to spend the money and that is a big mistake on their part. It is a crime. When you make mistakes that cost lives, then it becomes a crime.”

“I think they did this because people’s lives don’t matter and they thought ‘We will deal with that when the problem arises.’ The Australian government has acted the same when the fires have occurred here.”

Robert, a building inspector, discussed safety problems he had encountered. They included fire indication panels that failed after only months; carbon monoxide monitors or fans not working in car parks; unreliable emergency lighting; and faulty electrical and

internet wiring.

Robert had seen “concrete cancer” in some building foundations because they were not properly insulated from water. These problems were worsening because state governments had reduced builders’ warranty periods.

“I managed about 80 buildings,” he continued. “Only about two or three of them were OK. And they were in the wealthy suburbs. Anything else, forget it.”

Robert said it was not in the federal government’s interest to conduct an audit of buildings. If an audit found flammable cladding, builders would have to replace it. This could cost millions and bankrupt some builders.

“This material is dangerous; there are no ifs about that, and it puts people’s safety at risk. It’s not a question of going into a building and saying because it has a sprinkler system and adequate fire protection, we don’t need to bother about changing it. No. This is a defect and it needs to be changed ...

“Instead of spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a defence system that the fear-mongering US government says Australia has to buy for \$120 billion ... at least one billion could pay for an auditing department that regulates the building and construction industry. For less than one billion you could house all the homeless in Australia ...

“Take our health system, you could build hospitals or upgrade, you could put dental care back into all hospitals. You could pay dentists and doctors to come and work at the hospitals again.”

Stephen, who has worked as a fire safety engineer for almost 30 years, was familiar with the circumstances that led to the tragic death of a Chinese student in a 2012 Bankstown apartment block fire (see: “Australian coroner: Chinese student killed in building fire because laws violated”).

The polythene insulation inside the ACP cladding on the Grenfell Tower was highly dangerous, Stephen explained. “Basically it’s candle-wax but more crystallised and denser, and once it gets to a certain temperature it melts and behaves just like candle-wax. It’s pretty much the same material used in a hot-glue gun.”

The Grenfell disaster was the result of “a chain of moral inaction from those that sold the product, installed it on the building and the people that were

supposed to check it. It’s a product of capitalism and greed, and involves people who are either dishonest or don’t give a stuff and think they can offload the blame to the next person.”

Stephen said he first encountered the dangerous cladding in Sydney during the mid-1990s. “I expressed concerns about this material on a particular office building. I went into writing about it and made some warnings but generally got the feeling that I should shut up. There is always this pressure.”

The fire safety engineer said there was “an ongoing problem in the way the fire prevention and construction industry deals with [fire safety] products.”

Stephen explained: “ACP cladding can be very dangerous but the flammability of the different products can’t be judged from the outside. Manufacturers have products which respond differently when exposed to heat—some of the internal insulation products get harder. In others, like on Grenfell, it just melts.

“There has to be a proper and independent testing regime but there is no political leadership on this issue and the government tends to ignore it.”

In a recent statement, Fire Protection Association Australia chief Scott Williams warned that flammable cladding was “a ticking time bomb” and the “dirty secret of the building industry in Australia.”

Asked to comment, Stephen replied: “That’s not too far from the truth. You see this stuff on buildings all around the place, including in Sydney’s western suburbs on new green-fields factories and offices, and even on duplex homes. And the reason it’s on homes is because you’re legally allowed to build dwellings with combustible non-fire rated walls.”

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