

Another flammable cladding fire in Australia highlights government failure

By Paul Bartizan
6 February 2019

The complete failure of all levels of government in Australia to fix the problem of flammable cladding was on display early on Monday morning when yet another high-rise building erupted in flames.

The fire, which is believed to have been ignited by a cigarette, began on a balcony on the twenty-second floor of the NEO200 apartment block in central Melbourne, and spread rapidly up five levels of the building's 41 storeys. Eighty firefighters were able to quickly douse the pre-dawn blaze, and fortunately only one resident suffered smoke inhalation.

Over 370 apartments have been evacuated, and residents remain locked out of the building located on the corner of Spencer and Little Bourke Streets, pending rectification of fire safety systems. The operation of automatic fire sprinklers within the apartments in the affected levels prevented the fire spreading internally but caused significant water damage.

The apartment block was designed by Hayball Architects, and construction was completed in 2007 by LU Simon. The building was awarded the 2008 Master Builder Association's Excellence in Construction Award. The *neo200.com* website claims that the apartment block is "maintained to a high standard by a range of professional staff with oversight of the executive committee of owners." A real estate website offers a penthouse in the building for \$1.3 million and a two-bedroom apartment for \$629,000.

Just 750 metres around the corner from NEO200 is the 21-storey Lacrosse apartment block which caught fire in November 2014. At Lacrosse, a balcony fire similarly caused by a smouldering cigarette spread up 13 floors on the outside of the building within 10 minutes (see: "Australia: High-rise fire investigation reveals cost-cutting endangered lives").

Lacrosse was also built by LU Simon, who were subsequently involved in long-running legal action

against owners and building authorities over whether or not the flammable polyethylene core aluminium composite panel (ACP) cladding should be replaced and who would pay.

While LU Simon has reportedly agreed to replace the Lacrosse cladding, at a cost of around \$6 million, more than four years since the blaze the building remains a fire trap.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews responded to Monday's fire by insisting that the government would not change its current response to the cladding crisis but continue to follow proposals outlined by the state's Cladding Taskforce.

"We don't for an instant underestimate how serious these issues are, that's why we have taken action and that's why we will stay the course on it," Andrews complacently declared. The state government's previous responses to the flammable ACP cladding problem, however, failed to prevent the latest potentially fatal fire.

A 2017 audit conducted by the Victorian Cladding Taskforce identified 43 buildings as highest risk; 232 high risk; 228 moderate; and 126 low risk. The Neo200 building was listed in the moderate risk category and smoke alarms were installed in bedrooms adjacent to the flammable panelling in the building. Additional smoke alarms were installed on the balconies.

That the "moderate" NEO200 building has now burnt poses urgent and obvious questions about the dangers facing residents in the 275 higher risk buildings.

According to current estimates there are about 250,000 owners and residents of some 1,400 apartments in Victoria clad with flammable polyethylene core ACPs.

The state government, however, has refused to publish the location of the "at risk" buildings on the spurious pretext that arsonists or terrorists could target these structures. A key factor in not revealing the location of these buildings, however, is the commercial impact it will

have on the already rapidly declining Australian property market.

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade recently revealed that on average firefighters are called to more than 10 fires each month started by cigarettes in Melbourne. More fires involving flammable cladding are likely.

Monday's fire at NEO200 was caused by the very same flammable panels used on London's Grenfell Tower, where a devastating fire killed 72 people in June 2017.

Following the Grenfell Tower disaster, Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government expanded an ongoing Senate inquiry into the use of dangerous materials in the building industry, to include flammable ACP panels (see: "Australian inquiry into dangerous building products: An exercise in political damage control"). While the inquiry eventually called for a total ban on the import and use of the flammable cladding, this recommendation was rejected out of hand by the federal government.

NEO200 residents, like those evacuated from the Opal Tower in Sydney following major structural damage and fear of collapse of that high rise apartment block on Christmas Eve, have been treated with contempt.

NEO200 residents were initially told on Monday that they would be let back in after 48 hours and to pay for their own alternative accommodation. The evacuation order has been extended until at least Friday.

Yesterday afternoon hundreds of angry residents were summoned to the apartment block where they had to queue for hours. Authorities would only let four people at a time into the building and for just five minutes to pick up essential items.

WSWS reporters spoke with **Rosanna**, an apartment owner and a registered nurse. "I'm very unhappy. People aren't allowed to go back in. Yesterday someone was telling us that we could go back to the apartment, but by the time we got there police told us to go away. You see babies and mums standing outside in their pyjamas," she said.

"I read online that they [apartment owners] got two warnings about the material. But as an owner in that apartment block, I know nothing about it. I didn't even know that they were using the flammable cladding until the fire happened.

"The Body Corp has emailed me twice since the fire. The first email was just to say that they are aware of the fire and the second email said that they'll reimburse us for two nights of accommodation. That was it.

"I've emailed and asked about the food that's in our

fridges and clothing. I didn't have anything. I had to go and buy my own clothes. Who's going to reimburse us? The Body Corp never replied. They just said to find your own accommodation, spend up to \$200 per night, send them the receipt and they'll reimburse us. What's next? I don't know.

"We saw what happened [at Grenfell Tower] in London. There are other apartments in Melbourne that are at even higher risk but they haven't been named. We don't even know where they are. People need to know. It's not safe."

Michael, an international student from Korea who rents an apartment in the NEO200 block, was unaware of the flammable cladding on the building until told yesterday by the WSWS reporters.

"Now that I know this, I'm angry. So they save money with cheap materials to construct? What can I do? What's next? I feel powerless. A lot of people from the building are being forced to live with their families. They don't know where to go next."

As in the case of other privately-owned high-rise apartment blocks, the cost of removing the dangerous ACP cladding from NEO200 will fall on the owners of the building's 371 apartments. Liability for any problems caused by the design or construction of the building expired in 2017, ten years after construction was completed.

The danger facing people living in such complexes is a direct result of government deregulation of building industry standards, privatisation of safety inspection, and cost-cutting in line with demands from property developers and the construction industry.

In the UK, the Socialist Equality Party and the Grenfell Fire Forum have insisted that the current British government inquiry and police investigation into the disaster are not seeking to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of 72 people but are integral elements of an orchestrated state cover-up. Twenty months after the terrible event not a single person responsible has been arrested, let alone charged.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>