

Whalan residents speak after public housing explosion in Western Sydney

Our reporters
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On June 1, an explosion in a Western Sydney public housing complex claimed the life of a young woman, seriously injured another five people, and left numerous homes damaged or destroyed.

Neighbours of the Whalan townhouse complex spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last week about the dire conditions and poor maintenance of public housing, as well as their firsthand experience of the terrifying incident.

Gail, who lives in a townhouse next door to the complex that was destroyed, told WSWs reporters:

“I’m still traumatised. I was sitting at the dining room table and all my light fittings just fell out. The glass sliding doors at the back just shattered. There’s little holes in the ceiling.

“Next door to me, his ceiling nearly came down on his head, but he’s all right.”

In line with the comments of experts and other residents, Gail thought a gas leak was likely the cause of the explosion. She pointed to longstanding issues with getting maintenance done: “We could smell gas for months and months. We called the gas company out, but they couldn’t find anything.”

She was concerned that, even after the explosion, housing authorities were showing a shocking level of disregard for the safety of residents. She said: “The housing department said I can come back here. But there’s no electricity or gas—you can’t have a shower, you can’t cook. It’s just ridiculous.

“They reckon there’s not much damage in my place, but there’s cracks all along the driveway which weren’t there before.

“They said they’re going to fix my back door—I mean there’s more than the back door in this place. As far as I’m concerned, they’ve got to pull them all down.

“Once they pull [the next-door building] down, which they’ll have to, they’re going to see more damage. I reckon walls are going to fall out in my place.”

Gail’s daughter, who also lives in public housing, said, “The department of housing puts a band-aid on things.

“I’ve got a property out at Willmot [a nearby suburb]. My whole back wall is like a sponge and the moisture is coming through my bedroom. I’ve got watermarks on my ceiling.

“Major repairs have to be done, but they’ve come out and put two little plates on the back wall. What’s that going to do?

“Maintenance don’t follow up on where the problem’s coming from. They just fix it and get out as quick as possible. My back fence is a rotting wooden fence. They just put a brace on one bit of wood and they nail another bit of wood on, but they won’t replace it. A band-aid is all it ever is.”

Gail agreed, saying, “once you get to a certain age and they put you in these over-65 homes. They forget about you. They don’t do anything. You call maintenance and they never come out. Nothing ever gets done.”

Sandra and her husband live across a lane behind the devastated building. She said “It’s just been a shock. It’s a disaster. I’ve never heard anything like it. This gas leak has apparently been going for years and not fixed up.”

They were watching TV when the explosion happened: “My husband was in the lounge room. He was actually facing the explosion, I think that’s why his hearing’s gone.

“You can’t explain what it was like. At first I thought [the neighbour’s] tree had fallen down and [my husband] said, ‘that wasn’t a tree.’ We looked across

and couldn't believe our eyes.”

“We're living in there. We're hoping that they'll board up the windows at least, because it was a bit cold last night. The windows were all blown out. We're just lucky we had those fly-screens on, they really saved us.

“We're waiting for the housing department. We've owned this house for 50 years, it's not public housing, and we're insured, but [the housing department] haven't done an assessment, so we can't do anything yet.”

Pointing to the ceiling under the eaves of the house, she said, “all this has got to come down. It's all asbestos. It's very scary.”

“They fixed the tiles in the roof last night. They got up at five o'clock in the night, because we complained and complained, and we said if it rains tonight, the ceilings will all come down.”



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