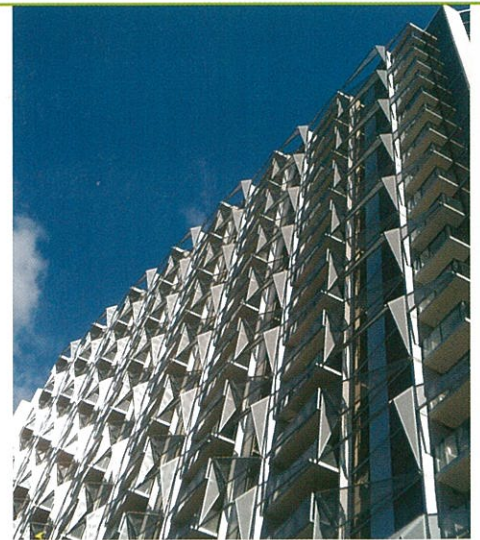
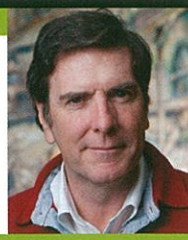


Non-compliant products ignite cladding firestorm

THE CONSTRUCTION, FORESTRY, MINING AND ENERGY UNION (CFMEU) IS CALLING FOR IMPORT RESTRICTIONS ON FAULTY BUILDING PRODUCTS IN THE WAKE OF A FIRE WHICH SPREAD THROUGH 13 STOREYS OF A MELBOURNE APARTMENT BUILDING.



ABOVE AND BELOW: The Lacrosse apartment building, Docklands.

LEFT: CFMEU national secretary Michael O'Connor says it's time for the government to take a hard line.

NON-COMPLIANT IMPORTED PRODUCTS have been blamed for the fire at the Lacrosse apartment building in La Trobe Street, Docklands.

CFMEU national secretary Michael O'Connor said it was time for the Federal Government to take a hard line.

"These companies are putting the lives and safety of Australians at risk by importing building products that do not comply with Australian standards," he said.

According to a report released by the city's Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), the fire began on an eighth floor balcony and spread to the 21st floor within 10 minutes.

"The external cladding material on this building did not, to the degree necessary, avoid the spread of fire as required by the Building Code of Australia," the report said.

"Simultaneous internal fire ignition events over multiple floors are simply an unacceptable fire safety solution for a residential high-rise building, or any other occupiable building for that matter."

Although there were no fatalities, 400 residents were evacuated from the building as a result of the fire which took place in November 2014.

MFB chief officer Peter Rau said the fire was challenging due to the speed in which it spread from floor to floor. He said the MFB commissioned the CSIRO to test some of the external cladding used in the construction of Lacrosse Docklands for compliance.

The cladding, Alucobest, did not comply with combustibility requirements for a high-rise building and contributed to the spread of the fire.

Fire debris and embers also fell on to the balcony of the sixth level, starting a fire around the air conditioner compressor unit.

Among the recommendations to come out of the report, the MBF has called for designers and certifiers to adopt building products with current certificates, and to ensure compliance with all conditions imposed on the certificate.

A spokesperson for the Victorian Building Authority said the builder and surveyor of the Lacrosse apartment building will be investigated.

The VBA is also taking steps to identify whether non-compliant cladding has been used in other Victorian buildings.

Other contributing factors identified in the MFB report include: Emergency Warning and Intercommunication System (EWIS) was compromised; apartment smoke alarms were tampered with and; fire extinguishers were not accessible.

On a positive note, the report said it was fortunate the installed fire sprinkler system operated well above its designed capability, preventing further internal spread.

"This was a rare and challenging fire incident for the MFB and one worthy of further investigation and enquiry into the contributory factors for the rapid fire spread," the report said.

"In the process of the investigation, the MFB gained valuable insight into the complexities associated with the adopted cladding material along with the performance of several fire safety measures.

"We anticipate that learnings gained through this process will provide improved insight and understanding to designers, engineers and certifiers, for greater fire safety in future developments."

Residents of the Lacrosse building are pursuing legal action against the builders, surveyors and co-developers over the use of sub-standard cladding.

Media reports claim Slater and Gordon is also considering litigation against others involved in the construction and design process.

According to the CFMEU, the use of sub-standard building materials is likely to get worse until there is a crackdown.

Non-compliant building products will continue to flood into the country especially now that tariffs have been removed under an Australia-China Free Trade Agreement, the union said.

A 2013 report by the Australian Industry Group found 92 per cent of building and construction manufacturing businesses had sub-standard products in their supply chain while 45 per cent suffered financially because of such products. *

