

London's Grenfell Tower inferno: A crime against the working class

By Laura Tiernan
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The fire that consumed Grenfell Tower block in west London early Tuesday morning has fuelled outrage among local residents and community groups, whose warnings of serious fire hazards were repeatedly ignored by council authorities.

The catastrophic fire broke out shortly before 1:00 a.m., on the second floor of the council flats in Kensington. Flames quickly engulfed the 24-storey building that is home to an estimated 500 people.

Twelve are confirmed dead, but the death toll is expected to rise. A community worker assisting with evacuations told the *Daily Mail* that he believed no one on the top three floors survived. A further 74 people are being treated in six hospitals, with 18 in critical care.

Residents and eyewitnesses described harrowing scenes as those trapped inside the burning building screamed for help, waving towels, t-shirts and mobile phone flashlights to attract the attention of firefighters.

As the smoke thickened, some residents on the upper floors jumped to escape the flames. Witnesses described emergency service workers covering the victims' bodies, some of them children, with sheets. People trapped inside called friends and loved ones. A young mother of two sent a Snapchat video message to her best friend at 2:54 a.m., begging for help before saying good-bye.

Lower down, on the ninth or 10th floor, a woman pleaded with onlookers to catch her baby wrapped in blankets. "A man ran forward and miraculously grabbed the baby," a woman told reporters.

A nurse who lives nearby told CNN, "It was an inferno... I've never seen anything like it in my life... Even firefighters in full protective gear were walking out wounded."

Residents told reporters that no fire alarm sounded to warn them of the blaze. Firefighters who called LBC radio confirmed there was no central fire alarm for the building, no internal sprinklers and just one stairwell for the entire tower block. The fire brigade's ladders only reached the 12th floor. Other residents explained they were told by emergency services to "stay put" and block their front door

entrances with wet towels rather than risk exiting the building. Many are thought to have perished.

A London firefighter with 29 years' service told LBC radio that stay-put instructions work "in a normal fire situation," ensuring that fires in a confined apartment are contained. But he explained the Grenfell Tower fire was not a normal situation.

As social media coverage of the fire went viral, thousands posted comments thanking fire crews for their heroic actions in rescuing victims. Many condemned recent cuts to the fire service that have seen 10 London fire stations closed, 27 fire engines removed, and 500 fire crew axed from service. £23.5 million in additional cuts are scheduled by 2019.

According to eye witnesses, the fire on the second floor spread across the building in less than 15 minutes.

External plastic cladding channelled the fire upwards, creating an inferno. The flammable cosmetic cladding was installed last year as part of hated "regeneration" measures by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO). The *Independent* reported that the cladding was added last year "to improve the view from the luxury flats around it."

Outside the tower block, local residents said authorities were deliberately gutting safety as part of efforts to gentrify the area and drive tenants out: "We believe the council and the TMO have been really managing a decline in social housing here, to add justification to their plans to regenerate, which is another word for demolishing the whole area," a Tower resident told reporters.

A young male resident told the BBC that newly-installed "shoddy" cladding "set the place alight." "There's two options, they can either regenerate these blocks or knock them down... They don't want us here and they put those rich man's blocks over there..."

The youth rejected attempts by a BBC reporter to silence him. It was "too early to jump to conclusions," she told him repeatedly. "Sometimes it's just dumb luck," LBC radio host James O'Brien told listeners.

These attempts at damage control are belied by the facts.

Grenfell Action Group (GAG) and residents have been warning of the risks of a serious fire at the flats for more than a decade. Just seven months ago, it warned that failings in the estate management organisation's health and safety practices were a "recipe for a future major disaster." These warnings were dismissed by Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council.

Fire hazard warnings issued by the group over many years have called attention to: faulty electrical wiring and frequent power surges, faulty emergency lighting, vehicles obstructing emergency access to the tower, the absence of a building-wide fire alarm system and the unsuitability of the council's "stay put" guidelines in the event of a fire in one of the blocks. In November 2016, the group quoted from the TMO's own report which found a failure to inspect and maintain fire safety equipment: "the fire extinguisher in this building, the basement boiler room, the lift motor room, the ground floor electrical room plus other areas were out of test date according to the contractor's label on the extinguishers."

The group reports that in 2013 a major fire at Grenfell Tower was "narrowly averted when residents experienced a period of terrifying power surges that were subsequently found to have been caused by faulty wiring."

"It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation], and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders."

The disaster is the product of a cover-up that goes to the heart of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May.

The last major tower block blaze in London, in July 2009, was at Lakanal House in Camberwell, claiming six lives including two children and a baby. A coroner's report recommended building regulations be updated, and urged developers refurbishing high-rise blocks to install sprinkler systems.

Tory Minister Brandon Lewis told MPs the government had committed to a policy of slashing one in two building regulations. "The cost of fitting a fire sprinkler system may affect house building—something we want to encourage—so we must wait to see what impact that regulation has," he said.

Former Housing Minister Gavin Barwell promised to review the Building Regulations relating to fire safety, but the review never materialised. Barwell was appointed May's new chief of staff Saturday.

On Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Radical Housing Network, to which the Grenfell Action Group is affiliated, released a statement: "The fire at Grenfell is a horrific, preventable tragedy for which authorities and politicians must be held to account. Grenfell's council tenants are not second class citizens—yet they are facing a disaster unimaginable in Kensington's richer neighbourhoods."

The group continued: "It is an outrage that in 21st-century Britain, authorities cannot be trusted to provide safe housing, and that people in council properties cannot put children safely to bed at night."

The Kensington and Chelsea borough is one of the most unequal in the country—home to the iconic Harrods department store, billionaire oligarchs and some of the most expensive real estate on the planet. A recent property in Carlyle Square, Chelsea sold for £16,500,000. It boasts an "award-winning garden," a cinema "with stadium seating," a bar area and a gym. Property agents Engels & Volker describe Chelsea's "laid back vibe."

Yet in the same borough, thousands of families are forced into squalid housing that amounts to a death trap. The entire apartment block must be regarded as a crime scene. No faith can be placed in the authorities. Workers must take matters into their own hands against a state cover up.

They must demand the full and immediate disclosure of all the dealings of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, including its financial relations with the local authority. But it cannot stop there. This must go all the way to government—beginning with establishing how ministers acted to thwart fire safety measures to cut housing developers' costs and an assessment of the impact of cuts in fire services.

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