

Three weeks after the Grenfell inferno: Official cover-up and callous indifference

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Three weeks after the Grenfell Tower inferno in west London, the initial shock and horror at the huge loss of life has given way to seething anger. The intervening period has only underscored the ruling elite's callous contempt for the traumatised survivors of the fire and the working class as a whole.

In the early hours of Wednesday, June 14, a small fire in a fourth-floor apartment in the Grenfell residential tower block rapidly became a raging inferno, engulfing the entire 24-storey building. The tower housed some 600 residents, many of whom had no chance of escape.

The building housed workers and poor people living in one of the most deprived areas of the UK, situated at the same time in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the wealthiest district in London. Nothing could more starkly sum up the colossal growth of social inequality not only in Britain, but internationally. The burnt-out husk of Grenfell stands within a stone's throw of "ghost" homes worth many millions that have never been occupied by their owners. It is only a few miles from Buckingham Palace.

The building was a death trap. There was no sprinkler system, no central fire alarm system and just one stairwell, which quickly became filled with highly toxic fumes. The fire spread so rapidly because the building was wrapped from top to bottom in flammable cladding material, which emitted deadly hydrogen cyanide. The toxic covering had been installed to provide a more pleasant view for the rich residents nearby and keep real estate values high.

When firefighters arrived to tackle the blaze, they were unable to deal with it due to poor access to the building and inadequate equipment and manpower. The Fire Brigade nationally has suffered devastating cuts over the last decade, with 11,000 firefighter jobs lost. Former London mayor and now Tory Foreign Minister Boris Johnson bears major responsibility for Grenfell,

having closed 10 fire stations, withdrawn 14 fire engines and cut 522 firefighter jobs during his tenure.

The Grenfell fire was not simply a disaster or tragedy, it was a crime.

Today, three weeks later, it is still unknown to survivors, family members and friends and the public how many people perished in the blaze. The true fatality figure is being concealed by the government out of fear of a social explosion. But the silence of the authorities can only mean that the death toll is appallingly high.

The Metropolitan Police say the 80 acknowledged to have died came mainly from 23 flats, yet there were 129 flats in the building. As of Tuesday evening, rescue teams had still not accessed the top three floors of the building, where it is understood that *all* of the occupants perished. The police say it will take well into next year before any accurate figure can be arrived at.

The survivors of the inferno and people forced to evacuate their housing in the tower's immediate vicinity have met with inhumane treatment from the authorities. Just £5 million have been offered by the government to Grenfell survivors, with less than half of this distributed so far.

Despite Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's pledge that all survivors would be permanently rehoused in the borough within three weeks, virtually nobody has been rehoused. Instead, entire families are being forced to sleep in hotels, with some sleeping rough in cars and parks.

Behind the crocodile tears of the government and borough council at the death and destruction at Grenfell, their real attitude was summed up last week when they banned survivors, local residents and the media from attending the first meeting of the council to be held since the fire. The since-resigned Tory council leader, Nick Paget-Brown, insisted that to allow the

public entry would “likely result in disorder.”

Grenfell Tower was hardly unique. Testing on 181 tower blocks out of 600 identified as potentially covered in highly flammable material met with a 100 percent failure rate. Even after the Grenfell inferno, it is reported that the unsafe cladding may not be removed. According to the BBC, an “Independent Advisory Panel” set up by the government after the fire “said it would ask experts whether the material could stay on a building ‘under certain approved circumstances.’”

The ruling elite is perpetrating a massive cover-up. Not a single person has been charged or arrested in a supposed “criminal investigation” ongoing since June 15.

The public inquiry into the fire announced by May has already been exposed as a fraud. As with every other such inquiry held in response to a loss of life at the hands of the state, it will do nothing to establish the truth or bring the guilty to justice. The judge selected to chair it, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, let the cat out of the bag when he said the inquiry could be “limited to the cause, how it spread, and preventing a future blaze.”

Jeremy Corbyn, the nominally “left” leader of the Labour Party, is doing all in his power to prop up May’s crisis-ridden minority government and contain popular anger. He immediately declared his support for May’s inquiry. Only when popular hostility made this position untenable did he send a friendly letter to May suggesting that the inquiry be held in two stages—the first along the same lines as Moore-Bick’s proposal, the second to deal with broader national issues.

Speaking on the weekend before tens of thousands of anti-austerity protesters in London, many carrying signs demanding “Justice for Grenfell,” Corbyn avoided any suggestion of mass action to bring down the Tory government. He did not make a single proposal for bringing to justice those responsible or providing for the needs of the victims. There was not a hint of a challenge to the wealth or property of the British ruling elite.

How could he make such a challenge, presiding as he does over a right-wing capitalist party that, with the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, is no less implicated than the Tories in gutting all regulations on the corporations and banks and fuelling the growth of social inequality?

Three weeks after the event, the historical and global

significance of Grenfell is becoming ever more clear. It will not be forgotten. It will be seen by historians in the future as a significant turning point, fuelling the growth of anti-capitalist, socialist and revolutionary sentiment in the working class and the resurgence of class struggle.

For masses of workers in Britain and internationally, their own lives will be divided into before and after Grenfell.

The Grenfell fire is a crime of capitalism. The Socialist Equality Party insists those implicated in political and corporate circles must be immediately arrested, charged and put on trial. The mass requisitioning of accommodation must be organised to house those made homeless and denied access to their homes because of lack of heating, hot water and gas. Hundreds of billions of pounds must be allocated to strip the cladding from unsafe tower blocks, and a mass public works programme enacted to make all public buildings safe. This must be paid for through the expropriation of the billionaires and the nationalization of the building industry and the banks under workers’ control.

The protests of residents in London against Kensington and Chelsea Council and the government over Grenfell and the sympathy and solidarity this has elicited among millions internationally is indicative of the new stage in the class struggle. This must be consciously directed toward the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system.

Robert Stevens

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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