

On-the-spot report

From the scene of the deadly London fire: “They’re putting money before lives”

By Alice Summers and reporters
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One local resident, Clive, condemned the fact that residents’ concerns over the safety of Grenfell Tower had been ignored, and challenged the official death toll of 58 people.

“The tenants had been raising these questions for years over the safety of that building if there were to be a fire. ... There is supposed to be access to safe stairwells to get people out in an emergency. That didn’t happen. How many tenants actually did get out?”

Asked why he thought tenants’ concerns had not been listened to, Clive responded: “Perhaps it was slightly to do with incompetence, but generally speaking it’s because of money. They [the government] are always trying to make cuts. All it would have cost to have that building safely refurbished would have been in the region of £200,000.” He added that “the [cheaper and flammable] cladding was clearly that which caused the tragic deaths of so many hundreds of people, as well as causing so many to lose their homes.”

Clive said those responsible had to be held accountable: “One thing is absolutely certain: there needs to be criminal action taken against the local council, the government and the prime minister, and against all of those who are responsible for the tragedy in that building.”

Another resident who lives in an apartment very close to Grenfell Tower criticized the public inquiry promised by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and said it would be a cover-up. He compared the tragedy to the Hillsborough football disaster of 1989, in which 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death. It took more than 27 years for the real circumstances of that

incident to be uncovered.

“The inquiry that Theresa May is promising is just going to buy the people responsible time,” he said. “When information does come out it will be much further down the line and people will have forgotten about it and only the immediate people affected will still be interested. By the time the inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster came out, people were thinking: ‘That was 20 years ago; I understand the significance but I don’t have any connection to it.’”

He said an independent inquest was needed to find and convict those responsible: “We don’t want Theresa May’s public inquiry. We don’t want it to be buried and let them come up with their stories and their answers and let the information out in dribs and drabs so that we can’t put together the whole story. We want an independent inquest, which means that they [the government] can’t hide the information, can’t sit on it and that we’d have much more access to the information. We want the people who are culpable for this to be held to account.”

Bilal, a young student, also spoke to the WSWS to denounce the disdain showed by local councils and the government for working class residents in council blocks such as Grenfell: “There are so many different people living in tower blocks like this one across the country, and what are they thinking before they go to sleep? Do they feel safe? People’s rights are being violated, constantly, on a day-to-day basis. The government doesn’t care; it doesn’t care about its citizens”.

Bilal said that this was not an isolated incident, but indicative of a process happening all over the capital: “I’m sure this council isn’t the only one. There’s

gentrification happening all over London; tenants aren't being listened to anywhere. We need to hold them [local councils and the government] to account, because they don't care otherwise.

"It's an example of the trend we've seen since the time of Margaret Thatcher, who began selling off council housing to be run by private corporations. We've seen that time and time again with public services as well—they're putting money before lives. That's not how our society should be."

Bilal also condemned the government's claims that there is not enough money to invest in public services and social housing, stating: "There's always money, it's just where is that money going? In this borough, which is one of the wealthiest in London, we can see that... councils prioritise their wealthy residents and they don't bat an eyelid when it comes to the poor, working class."

Pointing out that there is always money available for war and corporate tax cuts, Bilal continued: "How much money did the Iraq War cost us? How much do we give in subsidies to North Sea oil corporations? The money is there, it's just where that money is being used".

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The true horror of the fire is being suppressed. The previous day, a WSWS reporting team spoke with residents who live in a smaller residential block adjacent to Grenfell Tower. Amaria Badani, who works for an NGO, described what she witnessed as the fire began.

"When I saw the block alight it was about 1:30 a.m. I was on the street crying, helpless. We felt their pain and we could not do anything. It was very hard. Later on, we saw more flames. I saw a woman and she was screaming for help and at that same moment the flames burst from underneath her and she was gone. She was banging on the windows. I heard her cry for help, you could hear that, we all could hear her begging for help.

"The emergency services were great but it was too much for them to do, to get all the people out. My daughter has lots of friends who live in the building and she is in shock. She is only 17 and it is very difficult at that age to deal with such a tragedy, to witness the terror people have gone through. We were relieved to find out that all her friends were OK, that they all got out and are safe. But we do not know about

the others.

"It was only about a year ago that the refurbishment work [including the cladding which burst into flames and allowed the fire to spread rapidly] was done. There were a lot of complaints about the quality and haste of the work. What is for sure is that for such a fire to happen, we need a proper inquiry into it. Do not underestimate the commitment of the people in the area. We need answers and we deserve answers and we expect the investigation to be transparent and engage with us, so that we can understand what went wrong."

Amir, who lives in the same block as Amaria, is a retired worker. He said, "I was outside my flat and took some video and the flames were just above the roof of where we live, which is not even halfway up Grenfell Towers. I said to my wife, 'Don't worry, the firemen will cover it and they are going to stop the fire.' While we were standing here talking, we saw within half an hour that whole part of the building was in flames. It went to the roof, it was unbelievable.

"That's when we saw people shouting from one of the corners of the building for help. Some people were waving and some people using their phone as a torch. I was shouting at them, 'Come down, come down,' even though they were not able to hear me. They could not see the full extent of the fire. Seeing them burn like that is on my mind and I can't get rid of it."

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