

London resident on Grenfell fire: “I’m looking at a graveyard with people’s relatives inside”

By our reporters
7 July 2017

World Socialist Web Site reporters met Layla, a pregnant mother of three, outside the Westway Sports Centre in North Kensington. The centre has been used as the location of a makeshift “Assistance Centre” by Kensington and Chelsea Council in the aftermath of the inferno that destroyed nearby Grenfell Tower. Volunteers have assisted in providing shelter, food, drink, clothing and advice for families evacuated due to the fire.

Layla and her family were evacuated from their home “right underneath” Grenfell Tower. She described what happened in the early hours of June 14 as the fire engulfed the entire 24-storey tower and the aftermath in which they suffered callous treatment at the hands of the Conservative-run council.

“Oh the screaming!” she said. “The fire brigade told us to turn the gas off and get out—we were screaming with fear. The fire brigade was helpless. For five days we had nowhere to go. Then the TMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation] put us in a room with hot water, but no kitchen facilities. How can I feed the baby with takeaways? This is the richest borough in Europe—all they have given me is £500.

“The volunteers have been brilliant, they give food, clothes. Without them ...”

Asked who she thought was responsible for the fire, Layla answered, “The TMO, Kensington and Chelsea Council, the government—they’ve got blood on their hands, they are murderers. ...We’ve begged them to box the gas pipes, we have mice, asbestos!”

“My friend is in hospital with a burnt oesophagus from the cyanide [produced by the flammable cladding that was wrapped around Grenfell tower].”

Layla’s biggest concern was the trauma experienced

by her children. Her five-year-old daughter lost her teacher and three friends in the fire, and her 12-year-old son lost seven friends from his school.

“What has this done to the kids—they’re going to have some serious issues,” she said. “And the toxicity levels ... my kids say they don’t want to go back to the black home. It’s a grave. If I leave will I be homeless? I lived there 13 years. I had a normal life, I was happy.”

Layla fears that if she does not return home when the council deems it safe to do so, she will be declared intentionally homeless. “They want us to live like dogs,” she declared.

Deliveryman Chris said, “I’ve lost both my parents, but [the Grenfell survivors] lost everything, all their clothes, possessions. ... Everyone’s entitled to a roof over their heads. It’s going to be a long fought-out battle to get justice.”

Edward, a teacher, said the authorities “are all telling us, leave it to us. It is profit over safety. All that boasting about ending regulation. What did [former Conservative Prime Minister David] Cameron say, ‘War on regulations?’”

“I agree, ultimately this is an international struggle. I agree wholeheartedly that the capitalist system has failed.”

Another teacher, Joe, said the Grenfell Tower fire “highlighted the gaps between the haves and have-nots. We don’t know who is really missing; there were so many visiting because of Ramadan. One child is dead from my school!”

Katie MacDonald is a musician and part of the Wind-Up Penguin Theatre Company. She said, “We create shows for children and take them all over the

world. We work with disadvantaged children in orphanages and slums, with refugees across the world. But we felt that it was absolutely the time to come and do that here in London.

“You look at the kind of places we go to, like India, Brazil, Colombia, places that are essentially still developing in a lot of ways. You expect a country like Britain to have its shit together, but it doesn’t and [pointing to Grenfell Tower] that’s a classic example... I really believe that something needs to change.”

Asked what he thought about Prime Minister Theresa May’s inquiry into the fire, Cliff, a bus driver, said, “They’re not going to get any answers. They know they’ve screwed up. The rich people are so greedy, they don’t care about other people, just themselves. This country could turn into a third world country where you have to pay for hospital treatment.

“As for [ex-London Mayor and Conservative Foreign Minister] Boris Johnson, he cut the fire service, he closed all the ticket offices in the Underground. There used to be a proper transport system in London, but privatisation messes everything up.”

Lucy and Sarah from Aberdeen were in London for a concert by the singer Adele. This was cancelled, so instead they went to Grenfell Tower to pay their respects to those who died.

Lucy said she did not believe the official police death toll of 80. “It’s frustrating that people keep saying the numbers are being downplayed, because looking at that building you can totally understand why. It’s very hard to put an absolute number on it. Looking at that there has to be far more. If you look at 120 flats with an average of 2-4 people in them.”

Residents at Grenfell Tower had complained for years that that the block was unsafe and a fire hazard. Lucy said, “This is absolutely my experience. We stay in housing association flats up in Scotland and we go in with complaints and they never listen to them. You have to threaten to take things to a higher level before anything really happens and even then it’s never done to our satisfaction.

“It’s all being played down because basically the buck’s got to fall somewhere and nobody wants to be the one left with the baton in their hands. I do liken this to Hillsborough [the stadium in Sheffield where 96 Liverpool football club supporters were crushed to death in 1989] because it’s taken 28 years for those

who really were culpable to be taken to task. I don’t think anyone in this country will wait 28 years for the truth to come out. It makes me really angry.”

Anne Jones from Clapham said, “Our hearts are just broken for these people and being here it’s just shocking. I’m just thinking about this fictitious figure of 80 people dead and there is no way! We’re not stupid, we’re Londoners and we know how many people can get packed into a tower block. One lady had 12 children. Another report I saw online a couple of days ago, firemen found I think it was 42 people all huddled together in one flat.”

“I’m not a political animal, I think they’re all corrupt. But on a personal level, Mr. Boris Johnson, I don’t know how you can sleep in your bed having known you closed those fire stations. Everybody knew at the council that the ladders [used by the fire brigade] only go as far as the 11th floor. They had to send to Surrey for ladders that would maybe take them another three floors higher ... It is pure negligence, it is blood guilt.”

Looking at the burnt-out shell of Grenfell Tower, she said: “There’s nothing I can say. I’m looking at a graveyard with people’s relatives inside.”

Junior told the WSWS that he thought the issue was “galvanising the troops” to fight back. “What I read on my newsfeed is not what is going to happen—nobody saw Brexit coming, they didn’t think Trump was going to win. Things are happening all over the world—there is massive poverty among white workers, cities are left to rot in America.”

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