

London's Grenfell fire: Salford housing associations discontinue cladding removal

By our reporters
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In a dangerous precedent, two housing associations have suspended an ongoing operation to remove unsafe, combustible cladding on residential towers, due to what they described as “unclear” advice from the Conservative government in the wake of the deadly June 14 fire in Grenfell Tower in west London.

Two companies run 20 of the 29 tower blocks in the city of Salford in the northwest of England whose cladding failed fire safety tests—Salix, 8, and City West Housing Trust, 12. Salix said on Friday that in stopping the work it was “acting in line” with other companies around the UK that run social housing.

The company said, “The cladding systems in place on all these blocks met all fire safety and building regulations when they were installed,” adding, “We’ve now halted the removal of further cladding until we have clearer guidance from the authorities on the best and safest solution to replace the affected cladding.”

The *Guardian* reported Friday that another housing provider in the city, Pendleton Together, which runs the other nine high rises on behalf of Labour Party-run Salford City Council, has taken off only a portion of the cladding at the bottom of one of them, the 22-storey Thorn Court. This is despite the council announcing to great fanfare two weeks ago that the cladding would be removed from all nine.

Salford, with a population of 233,000, has reported the highest number of at fire-risk tower blocks of any town or city nationwide.

Major commercial considerations are clearly involved, given that the cost of de-cladding and associated remedial work is expected to run to many millions of pounds. Despite the grave danger to public health, the government has refused to confirm that it will bear the cost of decisions that councils may take regarding de-cladding operations.

The government initially ordered tests on the cladding of 600 residential tower blocks because they have similar or the same cladding as Grenfell Tower in west London, which was engulfed in a catastrophic fire on June 14. Due to the highly combustible cladding, which enveloped Grenfell, a small fire in a single apartment turned into a raging inferno that destroyed the entire 24-storey structure, killing at least 80 people and likely many more.

Despite the terrible death toll, the government and local authorities are still opposed to enforcing the most basic measures required for safe public housing. Earlier this week the BBC reported that 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.’”

This has major implications, imperilling the safety of hundreds of thousands of tenants.

So far samples from the cladding of 190 tower blocks, nearly a third of the 600 tower blocks in 51 local authorities throughout England and Wales, have failed combustibility tests.

Earlier this week Julia, a Salford resident, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that she lives on the 21st floor in the 23-storey Spruce Court tower block with her husband and one year-old boy.

“I’ve never seen anything like the fire at Grenfell before, it went up like paper,” she said. “Before I came to England, everything on TV looked so beautiful. I came here for a better life, but when building that house (Grenfell) they don’t put safety things in. I think it’s the same everywhere, if you are poor nobody cares about you. If that block was for the rich, it’s different.”

Julia explained that someone came and took samples of the cladding on her block. Then, she said, “I got a

letter that it's not passed the test. They said they will remove it as soon as they can."

Tina from Congo lives in the same unsafe tower block with her little girl. She said that a mutual friend in London "called my friend [in Grenfell Tower] when she saw it was on fire. She said, 'Are you in because there's a fire in your flat, come down quick!' She started to come down with her mum ... they died in hospital! She was 37 ... What can I say?"

"The government is responsible for the terrible loss of life. They don't care about people. They're born rich, they die rich."

The WSWs asked Paul, who has lived at Spruce Court for 11 years, what he thought about the Grenfell fire. He said, "There are class issues involved here. It's a rich man's country. A revolution is required and so is a redistribution of wealth. It doesn't matter who is in power—it is the rich that matter."

Reporters met Mary, 73, outside the Pendlebury Together-owned Thorn Court. She was visiting her son, railway worker Peter, 49. Originally from Scotland, Mary explained that she had travelled all the way from Tenerife after hearing about the Grenfell fire because her son is "worried sick. I have come here to support him; I want to help him find somewhere safe to live."

In a press statement issued in the wake of the Grenfell Tower inferno, Sheffield City Council in South Yorkshire said "categorically" that "all of our cladding is fire proof." Only days later they backtracked, admitting that the cladding at Hanover Tower at Exeter Drive in Broomhall was not that agreed with the appointed building contractors when the contracts were signed.

Part of the external cladding on the 16-storey tower containing 125 flats was then declared unsafe after a fire safety inspection. The tower block was externally refurbished with cladding by private contractors in 2009 as part of an overall renovation of the local council estate.

Jane Dunn, Sheffield City Council's cabinet member for housing, admitted that the cladding at Hanover Tower was not solid aluminium. The Labour-run council claim they do not know why a different material was used on the tower that failed the test.

The council has estimated that the cost of rectifying the dangerous construction will be in the region of £1 million. The fate of Sheffield council's 25 other tower

blocks remains unclear.

Sheffield residents told our reporters that at a meeting between residents and the council they were offered "rehearsed answers." A resident living on the top floor said she was "terrified."

We asked a Hanover Tower resident, who wished to remain anonymous, if she trusted the council. She said, "No! After that [Grenfell] fire it could have been us."

She had not been given the option of moving out while the cladding was replaced. "A lot of people haven't anywhere to go to," she said.

Regarding the lack of safety in the building, she added, "We have only this door [pointing to the front entrance door] and one at the back that's the same exit for fire doors."

Asked if she was aware of any fire evacuation plans, she said, "I haven't got a clue. I don't know," adding, "We should at least feel safe, not afraid, that's the minimum. The safety ... it's just like a time bomb—anything could happen."

The tenant said she had no faith in the public inquiry being held by the Conservative government into the fire.

The majority of urban area councils around the UK, including in Sheffield, are run by the Labour Party. Asked her thoughts on this she said, "This is why I won't vote for anybody. They promise you what they are going to do, but as soon as they get in they go back on their words. I've got no faith in any of them."

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