

Six months since the Grenfell Tower fire

By Robert Stevens and Chris Marsden
14 December 2017

On June 14, fire engulfed the entire 24-storey structure of Grenfell Tower in London. Millions were horrified by terrible scenes, broadcast throughout the world, showing how a small fire in a fourth floor flat spread up the side of the building within minutes to become a raging inferno. It claimed at least 71 lives and left hundreds more grieving for their loved ones.

The Socialist Equality Party offers its condolences to the living victims of Grenfell on this painful occasion, marking six months since that fateful day.

Grenfell has come to symbolise everything that is rotten in a social order, dominated by the selfish concerns of a corrupt financial oligarchy and characterised by studied indifference towards the fate of the broad mass of working people. The entirely avoidable loss of life epitomises the devastation capitalism has wrought, not just in Britain but throughout the world, due to a systematic and historically unprecedented transfer of social wealth from the working class to the super-rich.

In the days following the blaze, public shock turned to anger as it became clear that in the wealthiest borough of one of the very richest of capital cities, working class residents had burned to death because their home had been turned into a death trap.

The fire spread so rapidly because Conservative-run Kensington and Chelsea borough council and its arms-length management company, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) had encased the tower in cheap, highly flammable cladding panels. This was part of a cosmetic “refurbishment” programme to conceal the decades-long lack of investment in the tower’s maintenance, while making it look more attractive to the wealthier residents of North Kensington anxious to safeguard house prices running to multiple millions of pounds.

Flammable cladding was chosen over

non-combustible alternatives to save a few thousand pounds. The same contempt for the basic safety of residents meant that sprinklers were not fitted in the tower, so that many of those seeking to flee down a single exit stairwell were overcome by the toxic smoke—including vast quantities of hydrogen cyanide emitted by the cladding.

Sealing the fate of those who died in the flames, fire engines faced restricted access to the blaze due to ill-considered but financially lucrative construction work on the former car park. In addition, savage cuts in the capital’s fire brigade by former London mayor, now foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, severely hampered the fire-fighting operation.

The powers-that-be cannot claim ignorance. Tenants had repeatedly warned the building was unsafe. One blog post from the Grenfell Action Group, just seven months before the fire, warned that only a “catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.”

Sadly, the group was proven correct. But the neglect and contempt for working class residents did not end with the fire. In the hours and days subsequently, the bereaved survivors and their families received no help from the council or government. No emergency programme was activated, so that local residents took it upon themselves to assist the victims. And despite the flood of crocodile tears, statements of contrition and all the many promises made by the authorities, the treatment of Grenfell’s victims has been cruel to the point of sadism.

Six months on, the council—which at the time of the fire had reserves approaching £300 million—has done precious little to rehouse the victims. Out of the 208 Grenfell households that needed homes, 118 are still in

hotels and bed-and-breakfasts or living with friends—including 29 families with children. In addition, 48 households have accepted permanent housing offers but have not yet moved in—making a total of 166. Including residents forced to leave blocks adjacent to the tower, a staggering 857 people—303 children—will be spending Christmas in temporary accommodation.

Despite the terrible crime committed, *not a single person or organisation* has been brought to justice for what took place. The day after the fire, London's Metropolitan Police opened a criminal investigation, yet even now not a single person has been questioned, let alone arrested or charged. A statement issued this week by the Met to a procedural hearing of the official government inquiry said there was no prospect of any "suspect" being questioned until the autumn of next year, citing the excuse of an ongoing forensic examination of the building.

Met Commissioner Cressida Dick has now told the London Assembly that the forensic stage of the criminal investigation is unlikely to be completed until 2019 and the full investigation could take years.

Both the police investigation and the inquiry convened by Prime Minister Theresa May are part of a state orchestrated cover-up.

The inquiry's presiding judge, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, has no powers to prosecute anyone, but has absolute control over what questions can even be raised by legal representatives of survivors and other interested parties. The terms of the inquiry rule out a priori any evaluation of issues of a "social, economic and political nature." A petition by survivors and their families that Moore-Bick accept a representative panel and not be allowed to vet questions has gathered over 16,000 signatures. As with the police investigation, the inquiry is not set to hand over even its interim findings, on how the fire started and spread, until next autumn.

Such is the level of public scepticism over the official inquiry that this week the UK's watchdog on human rights, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) announced that it would launch its own into why more than 70 people perished in homes "managed by the State". The EHRC's application to be a core participant in Moore-Bick's inquiry was rejected.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the fire, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorialised:

"There are events in world history that lead to a fundamental change in consciousness and create the basis for developing a socialist political orientation among broad masses of workers. The June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno is such an event.

"In years to come it will be necessary to refer to the political life of Britain in terms of 'before' and 'after' Grenfell..."

"Millions understand that Grenfell was not an accident, but a crime. It was the entirely predictable result of four decades of deregulation by successive Conservative and Labour governments and their local representatives, all of whom are culpable in mass murder."

The SEP described Grenfell as an act of "social murder" because the authorities placed residents in a situation where the potentially terrible consequences of policy decisions were well understood.

In August, the SEP held a public meeting in north Kensington, where over 100 people attended. The meeting demanded that the guilty in both political and business circles must be arrested, charged and put on trial, and urged survivors, local residents and workers everywhere "to place no confidence in May's rotten whitewash of an inquiry, or in Labour's attempt to make it more palatable..."

The SEP determined to establish a forum that would "work to expose the government's fraudulent inquiry into Grenfell." The Grenfell Fire Forum met for the first time on September 30.

Everything done towards genuinely seeking justice for Grenfell has been accomplished through the independent actions of local residents and their supporters. The forum provides a political mechanism through which the working class can mount a socialist and internationalist counteroffensive, against all efforts to bury popular anger under a mountain of hypocritical moralising about "national unity" and "lessons learned" and the channelling of the struggle for justice through Moore Bick's dead-end inquiry.

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