

British media blacks out self-immolation of woman at Barnet council office

By Tom Pearce
8 September 2018

No further details have been made public about the incident last month of a woman setting herself on fire at a council office run by Barnet council in north London.

On August 19, a witness reported to the Labour Party-supporting blog *Skwawkbox* that a woman in her 50s “had set fire to herself” in a council housing office in Barnet House.

Skwawkbox reported that “the woman apparently driven to desperation by her situation set herself alight in the housing office of Tory-run Barnet council.” She was said to be in a critical but stable condition. The council referred all questions to the police, who said only that they were continuing their enquiries.

According to the website, neither Barnet, Capita—the outsourced safety provider for the council—nor the police disputed this was a self-immolation.

The reason that nothing else is known about the incident and its outcome is not just the silence of the authorities, but also because it is being entirely ignored by the mainstream media. Not a single local or national newspaper or broadcaster has reported the tragedy.

This is despite social media postings by members of the public, including one by a person who uploaded video footage to Twitter showing staff evacuating the building and emergency vehicles gathering at the council offices. Information was shared on Facebook with some saying that the woman had her children with her when she set herself alight.

Skwawkbox confirmed through a source that in order to evacuate the building staff had to pass the woman in flames, due to a failure in the outsourced health and safety arrangements. As a result, the fire alarm on the floor where the incident happened failed to work. In addition, security checks that had been in place because of previous suicide attempts, failed to detect that the woman was carrying flammable liquid on her person.

Barnet council refused to comment, but eventually confirmed only that “an incident took place at Barnet House on Wednesday, 15 August. The Metropolitan Police Service

is currently investigating this matter and it would be therefore inappropriate to comment any further.”

Skwawkbox quoted a parent of a local resident who said, “My daughter took her mother to an appointment at Barnet Council (Tory) housing office yesterday afternoon. They were being interviewed in a side room when they heard a commotion. Someone came and told them to leave the building. When they left the room they saw flames on front of them in the waiting room.

“A young woman had set fire to herself. Everybody was just turfed out after witnessing this terrible ordeal. She said that those outside were in severe shock but left to their own devices. There hasn’t been a word about this in the news or local news. This is Tory Britain. How often is this happening and going unreported.

“Can someone please post this on FB [Facebook] or ask questions on Twitter. Get it out in the Public domain. I can’t do it for family reasons. I just heard this from my daughter now. She was still very upset and had to spend the night with her mum. Please don’t just copy my link but relate the story. So, so tragic. Will we ever know her story?”

Another Twitter user commented on the media blackout by replying to a BBC News online video story on August 19 about men with elaborate beards, “This is definitely more newsworthy than a desperate woman setting fire to herself in a Barnet Council office.”

If the event was a suicide attempt by a person driven to it because of a desperate need of assistance, it is an almost inevitable product of the austerity measures that have been imposed with such ferocity in Barnet.

Conservative-run Barnet has long been a flagship council for cost-cutting services by privatisation. The council’s *One Barnet Framework* even claims that the programme “is not fundamentally about budget cuts”, suggesting its main goal is the privatization of all services.

Two years after embarking on its One Barnet project in 2012, services outsourced to the private sector include: management of council housing, care for people with disabilities, environmental health, procurement, parking, the

highways department, legal services, cemeteries and crematoriums, IT finance, HR, planning and regeneration, trading standards and licensing.

The Unison trade union estimated that after the move to Barnet's "Alternative Delivery Model" in 2014—widely promoted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government—just 332 of Barnet's 3,200 staff in September 2012, would remain, with the rest employed by the private sector.

Alongside this have been huge cuts to vital services, with £144 million in spending cuts imposed between 2010 and 2017. Even with planned austerity measures over the next two years, the council still faces a deficit of £9.5 million. This could lead to it heading the same way as Northampton council, into bankruptcy.

Through the restructuring of Your Choice Barnet (YCB) in 2014, care workers have seen staffing levels cut by 30 percent and cuts in pay on shift allowances. This has led to an increased reliance on agency workers, which has had an impact on the continuity of care.

The mentally ill have been hard hit. The council outsourced its services to private company Capita, and in 2016 allowed it to cancel Freedom Passes—allowing free transport—for adults with mental health issues and other disabilities like autism, without giving any notice. It meant many of the most vulnerable only found out the next time they tried to take public transport. Others had their passes cancelled as a result of a reassessment, despite there being no change in their condition.

Every service in Barnet council is constantly under review, as the council demands savings. The handling of children's services led to a damning 2017 Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills report that concluded, "The vast majority of care planning is ineffective".

As austerity deepens, instances of suicide and attempted suicide, including self-immolation, are becoming more frequent.

In 2015, a 67-year-old man, Peter Sherwood, set himself on fire in Lowestoft in broad daylight. At this time, the UK government forced those on Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to reapply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This had been put in a letter to Sherwood, with his daughter telling his inquest that she believed it contributed to him killing himself.

In 2013, a 53-year-old grandmother, Stephanie Bottrill, from the West Midlands took her life in despair over the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's hated "Bedroom Tax."

In 2011, a married couple, Mark and Helen Mullins carried out a suicide pact. When the couple died, they were

living in a wretched and appalling state. They had been living on £57.50 a week for the last 18 months—the unemployment benefit that was claimed by Mark. For months, the couple had been unable to afford food or heating and did not have the means to buy basic household items.

These events echo the situation in other countries in Europe whose populations too have faced savage austerity.

In Spain in 2013, a 57-year-old father of two who said "he did not even have enough money to eat" set fire to himself a few metres from a hospital. He was unemployed and died after suffering 80 per cent burns.

Suicides in Greece, which has been a test bed for the imposition of austerity throughout the continent, included a 77-year-old man, who shot himself in Athens main Syntagma Square to protest cuts. In May 2013, a mother and her son died after leaping hand in hand from the roof of their apartment building in the capital.

Last November, a report revealed that austerity has led to 120,000 extra deaths in England. University College London (UCL) found that cuts to health and social care spending since 2010 have had an effect on the over 60s and care home residents. A "mortality gap" has emerged between those who can afford care and others who are relying on the stretched National Health Service (NHS).

A report released by the UK Office for National Statistics last month, "Changing trends in mortality: an international comparison: 2000 to 2016", analysed life expectancies and age-standardised mortality rates in selected countries globally from 2000 to 2016.

It revealed that in all categories the UK was placed in the bottom two, along with the United States, out of 20 developed countries. It found that "Until 2011, life expectancy in the UK had been increasing for a number of decades. But in the second decade of the 21st century, the UK along with several other countries has seen a notable slowdown in these improvements in both male and female mortality".

This covered the period after the beginning of mass austerity in the UK, when at least £110 billion in spending cuts was imposed by central government and implemented by Labour and Tory local authorities nationally.

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