

UK: Vigil mourns homeless man who “lived” in a Hackney bus shelter

By our reporters
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More than 120 people attended a vigil Friday night, expressing sadness and horror over the death of Mustafa, a homeless man who died last week at a bus shelter in Stoke Newington in the London borough of Hackney.

Streets Kitchen, a homeless outreach group, organised the vigil after Mustafa's lifeless body was discovered in the early hours of July 30. Mustafa—known as Musa by locals—had slept at the Stoke Newington Road bus stop for over a year. He had endured snowfall and this summer's intense heat, just a few miles from the City of London's gleaming skyscrapers.

Mustafa, believed to have been in his early 60s, was well known in the neighbourhood. A shoemaker by trade, with close ties to the Halkevi Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre, he had worked as a shoe polisher.

As news of Mustafa's death spread, it provoked an outpouring of anger. “Over the past 36 hours, the conversation at the bus stop where Mustafa was left to die has been raging,” Ngozi Fulani, a local charity worker wrote on Twitter. She described how her “heart sank” as soon as she saw the police cordon around the bus stop.

Fulani wrote. “I think Hackney should consider doing a ‘homicide review’ because how isn't this manslaughter? He was clearly in need of help and allowed to die like trash on the road! He WAS somebody!”

By Friday night, the bus shelter where Mustafa died was a mass of flowers, candles and handwritten messages. Bus drivers showed their respects by slowing down or stopping at the bus shelter where he had been a fixture for so long. At one stage during the vigil a London bus driver parked a bus full of

passengers to join the vigil, winning a huge round of applause.

Addressing the vigil, Fulani said that council officials had left their “condolences” at the bus stop a couple of hours before the vigil. “What they did say was that there was such an ill-feeling at the moment that they didn't feel they'd be welcome.”

On social media and in handwritten messages, mourners slammed austerity cuts imposed by the Tory government and Hackney's Labour-run council. “RIP Mustafa who died because: Tory government killed 130,000 people with austerity cuts. Hackney Council: won't provide adequate MH [mental health] or housing services. Charities: Paying their execs huge salaries while using volunteers ... Now they all blame him.”

Hackney Council was forced into damage control. Its Labour Mayor Philip Glanville issued a hypocritical letter on July 30, noting the “tragic circumstances” surrounding Mustafa's death, but quickly shifting the blame onto the victim: “Our rough sleeping outreach team had been working intensively with him, including making an offer of accommodation earlier in the summer. Very sadly to date and despite this and other support we hadn't been able to convince him to take up the services on offer and we were continuing to work with him to explore all options.”

Glanville's letter was a whitewash. As Fulani had noted on her Twitter post on the morning of Mustafa's death, “So many times I've begged Hackney Council to help him only to be told ‘he didn't want help.’ Well clearly he did. He was vulnerable.”

On July 24, in the midst of a heatwave, Fulani, who works for a domestic abuse charity, posted an urgent appeal: “PLEASE somebody help that homeless man that ‘lives’ at the bus stop at Princess May Stoke Newington. Don't let him live there & die there.

@hackneycouncilthe services leave him there health and mental state has rapidly declined.”

Fulani’s plea went unheeded.

Jane, a retired nurse who volunteers for Streets Kitchen, told our reporter, “I hope the vigil will highlight the issue of homelessness, and encourage some joined up thinking as the homeless have so many problems, not just accommodation, but mental health, addiction and so on. We have to get the community to work together, to formulate joint responses, and get answers from the council about what is happening.”

John, who runs Streets Kitchen, explained that his organisation runs pop-up kitchens across London, including in Hackney two nights a week: “Some 100 people come to the Hackney Street Kitchen, not just rough sleepers, but people on Universal Credit, even children are coming. The situation is getting worse because of the Tories’ cuts. There is no support for people.”

When asked what he thought of the Labour Council in Hackney, he said, “The councils vary. Some Labour Councils are worse than the Tories.” He cited Manchester Council which “has criminalised the homeless and is trying to ban soup kitchens in Piccadilly Gardens in Manchester city centre. The situation is getting worse in Hackney. There is no doubt about it.”

Labour is directly implicated in Mustafa’s tragic and unnecessary death. Hackney’s Labour-run council has carried out the deepest budget cuts of any local authority in London. While the median cut to councils across England was £297 per household, Hackney’s fell by £1,432, according to a report by the BBC’s fact-checking service in April 2019.

A report on Hackney Council’s website states, “Since 2010, Government has cut our core funding by £140 million—that’s about half. It is planning to cut another £30 million by 2022. Our overall spending power has been cut by £529 per person—that’s the highest cut in London. In the meantime, demand for services is increasing.”

But Glanville and his fellow councillors have dutifully enforced every cut.

Labour’s shadow home secretary, Diane Abbott, a close supporter of party leader Jeremy Corbyn, was quick to respond to Mustafa’s death. ‘It’s disgraceful that in the world’s fifth largest economy people are

dy[agdi]n th[is] most desperate circumstances,” she said. “The Tories should be utterly ashamed of themselves.”

Abbott’s statements are rank hypocrisy. Stoke Newington sits within Abbott’s own Hackney North electorate, while the city is run by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. Labour has played a central role in turning London into a bastion of inequality and mounting social distress. At least 654 homeless people have died in London since 2013, according to the Office for National Statistics.

The Tories’ cuts are being implemented by Labour councils across the UK. Since 2015, Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell have insisted that Labour-run councils deliver “legal budgets,” writing to instruct them to enforce the cuts being demanded by a hated Conservative Party government.

In response to Mustafa’s death, many workers are drawing conclusions from Labour’s role. After a £2,000 crowdfunding appeal was launched to create a plaque in Mustafa’s memory, one person responded, “Normally, I would make a donation but on this occasion, I totally refuse to because I believe the responsibility rests entirely with the local authority who failed this man and needless to say, have failed many, many more!”

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