

Grenfell Tower inquiry reveals more criminality by corporations involved in refurbishment

By Charles Hixson
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The main contractor on the “refurbishment” project that turned Grenfell Tower into a death trap ahead of the June 14, 2017 inferno completed their evidence to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry this week.

On July 20, Rydon contractor manager, Simon Lawrence, admitted the company used cheaper, more flammable Aluminum Composite Material (ACM) cladding rather than zinc-based materials, producing a cost savings of £419,627.

The following day, Lawrence was presented with a witness statement from David Gibson, head of capital investment at Kensington and Chelsea Tenants’ Management Organisation (KCTMO)—which managed the tower on behalf of the local Conservative council. He claimed Lawrence said the plastic-filled panels “would create no problem because the materials used were completely inert and would not burn at all. The meeting accepted his assurances in this regard and nothing came to my notice subsequently prior to the fire to question that these assurances were not accurate.”

Lawrence denied the claim, insisting, “I wouldn’t give technical assurances unless I had that information from the designers or specialists.”

Rydon was committed to cost cutting. Lawrence admitted using “Essex boy patter” in trying to persuade KCTMO to use cheaper face-fixed ACM. This was rejected because the cassette-form Reynosa PE (Polyethylene) had a smoother exterior look, which was more aesthetically acceptable. Ironically, the Reynoband had a worse fire-safety rating than the cheaper fixed version—a fact Lawrence said he was unaware of.

Lawrence’s final day of testimony on July 22 was dominated by evidence of Rydon’s contentious relations with Grenfell residents and subcontractors.

Residents alleged threats and harassment from Rydon employees and the KCTMO, including “builders swearing, use of abusive and sexually explicit conversations.” For his part, Lawrence described residents critical of the work as “persistent and aggressive,” labeling them “rebels.” He told the inquiry there were “several very vocal, dare I say aggressive residents.”

One named was Edward Daffarn, a co-leader of the Grenfell Action Group (GAG). GAG later predicted, eight months before the tragedy, that due to the neglect of their landlord the block could be catastrophically destroyed by fire.

In 2014, Daffarn complained to KCTMO that neighbours had reported “the TMO intend to ‘smash down the door’ of any tenant or leaseholder that fails to cooperate with the installation of new heating systems or windows.”

How Rydon viewed tenants is clear from an email revealed by the inquiry, from Lawrence to a contractor fitting window surrounds with combustible material. The surrounds would play a major role in the Grenfell inferno. Lawrence wrote, “We are under massive pressure from the rebel residents about our quality of work... so far their complaints are unfounded, but I need to ensure our finish is good quality, especially on the show areas.”

Lawrence did criticize what he described as “poor surveying and cheap, incompetent subcontractors.” Nevertheless, he gave the contract providing window surrounds to S D Plastering—a firm run by his own former manager at Rydon, Mark Dixon. Instead of packing the gaps around the windows with non-combustible fiber of Rockwood insulation, Dixon’s firm used combustible foam boards, which the inquiry concluded contributed to the fire. Lawrence admitted he failed to read the bill of works showing S D Plastering planned using Celotex panels. This did not meet the safer specification and breached building regulations.

Rydon project manager, Simon O’Connor, replaced Lawrence on the stand the next day. Despite working for the firm since 2002, Grenfell was O’Connor’s first job as project manager, and the only time he had worked with cladding.

An entire culture within corporations, built up over decades, which viewed “regulations” as impediments to reaping greater profits was evident in his testimony. Of building regulations, O’Connor was “aware that they were there, but not familiar of them in detail.” He was unaware cladding had caused fires, and of the existence of Approved Document B, the main Building Regulations document outlining safety requirements.

His grossly exaggerated CV stated he was “responsible for all

operations on site,” including “co-ordinating design and management of subcontractors.” O’Connor told the inquiry, “No, I wouldn’t be qualified to co-ordinate design; I wouldn’t know where to begin.” He explained he hadn’t completed HNC Building Studies, also listed on the CV. Saying this was the first time he had viewed it along with the tender document, O’Connor concluded it “would’ve been [compiled by] someone like the bid writers or marketing team” at Rydon.

Although O’Connor arranged a monitoring programme for each subcontractor to be reviewed on a monthly or weekly basis, he said he “wouldn’t necessarily go to these.” He assumed all materials brought on site were safe, but left that responsibility to subcontractors, and had no system for them to report deliveries to Rydon.

O’Connor, who resigned in 2015 due to the “pressure of the project,” gave his evidence hidden behind a screen in accordance with the vulnerable witness protocol, to protect his mental health and well-being!

On Monday, Rydon site manager David Hughes was questioned about his approval of swapping the installation material used on the Tower. Hughes maintained he gave permission for Harley Facades to substitute Kingspan K15 insulation for the more usual Celotex RS5000 in December 2015 or January 2016. However, purchase orders and photographic evidence show that the Kingspan had already arrived in May and September 2015.

The manufacturer of Kingspan observed their product was used “without our knowledge, as part of a combination for which it was not designed, and which Kingspan would never recommend.”

Hughes claimed, “They are so similar to me, my knowledge and experience, that I didn’t see it as an issue. I’ve never heard insulation described in terms of combustible or non-combustible.”

Fire risk assessor Carl Stokes, who inspected Grenfell in 2016, reported, “Following discussion with representatives at Rydon... my understanding on leaving the tower after my inspection was that the actual cladding was compliant with the building regulations.” However, Hughes did identify possible problems with the smoke control aspect of the extract system during his May 2017 “end of defects” inspection two weeks before the tragedy and reported it to installer J.S. Wright.

Documents in the public domain indicate collusion between the board of the KCTMO and Stokes, who had been KCTMO’s fire risk assessor for seven years, over the suppression of the fact that Grenfell Tower had failed basic fire safety checks. Stokes was employed by the KCTMO on the recommendation of housing official Janice Wray who, according to reports, stated Stokes was “willing to challenge the fire brigade on our behalf if he considered their [safety] requirements to be excessive.”

On Tuesday, Stephen Blake, Rydon’s refurbishment director, answered questions regarding his long relationship with

KCTMO, and in particular, his long “professional relationship” with its director of assets and regeneration, Peter Maddison.

The day before Rydon’s interview with KCTMO regarding the company’s Grenfell bid, Blake emailed Rydon’s legal representative: “At the Housing conference we had meetings with senior representatives from K+C... we have been informally advised that we are in pole position [to win the lucrative refurb contract]—ours to lose.”

Rydon won the Grenfell contract in 2014 because its cost-cutting bid was by far the cheapest. Its final bid was £9.2 million—with rival Durkan’s bidding £9.9m and another firm, Mulalley, £10.4 million.

The following day, the inquiry examined the design of window cavity barriers. The 2012 fire in the Taplow tower block on Camden’s Chalcots Estate had the same ACM cladding as Grenfell, and used the same cladding subcontractor, Harley Facades, with Rydon as principal contractor. Harley later produced a report on the fire, concluding that firebreaks in the window prevented flames spreading between flats. Blake himself was on the distribution list of the report, which included a picture of him pointing to the firebreaks. He admitted he never checked with Harley or the architects about barriers on Grenfell.

After many delays, the inquiry was halted on Thursday for a further five weeks to allow for summer holidays.

Despite everything said by Rydon and the other companies involved in the refurbishment—revealing criminality that resulted in Grenfell Tower being unsafe for human habitation—the Inquiry has granted immunity to all who testify so that statements they give to the inquiry cannot be used as evidence against them in a future prosecution.

To achieve justice, the Socialist Equality Party repeats its call for an end to all collaboration with this judicial fraud. Grenfell supporters should call for the inquiry to be terminated immediately. The demand must go out for those responsible for social murder to be arrested, charged and put on trial.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>