London: The Kingsway pavement fire and the need for socialism

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The following is a statement by David O'Sullivan, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the London constituency of Holborn and St. Pancras.

Last week, London witnessed its latest "pavement explosion". Kingsway, one of the capital's main transport routes, remains shut after balls of fire and plumes of thick black toxic smoke shot out of manholes and cracks in the road.

A huge swathe of central London was cut off from the power grid as dozens of fire engines, police and utility vehicles, and hundreds of firefighters, police officers, gas and electricity workers were called to the scene. Thousands of workers had to be evacuated from the Holborn area and offices, shops, colleges, theatres and the Royal Courts of Justice were closed. The cost to the capital's economy is estimated at £40 million.

The incident endangered the lives of many people in this densely populated area of the capital and could have had fatal consequences. It is a stark confirmation that the subordination of all aspects of life to the capitalist market is incompatible with the necessary maintenance and development of the infrastructure which millions rely on in the largest city in Europe.

Relevant authorities simply expressed their apparent bemusement over the pavement fire.

A statement from UK Power Networks (UKPN), owners of London's power cables, declared that "until we can gain access to that particular area we won't understand what's caused it and what we can do."

Conservative Westminster City Council cabinet member Richard Beddoe declared, "Pavements have exploded in central London previously and it is a very worrying trend."

In fact, in 2011 there were nine pavement explosions, a figure that rose to 64 for the first six months of 2014.

In 2013, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) warned about the increasing number of people being injured by such explosions and the possibility that someone would be killed. HSE principal specialist electrical inspector John Steed told reporters, "It is my concern, yes. … That's why I'm having regular meetings with UK Power Networks. I'm testing them. It's their risk."

In September 2014, following a pavement explosion that caused a lorry to catch fire, closing down Piccadilly Circus, Westminster Council Environment Policy and Scrutiny Committee revealed that most of the explosions occur in "Link Box" chambers, of which UKPN had around 4,000 in Central London. The company said it was intending to replace them … but that it would take 10 years!

The committee reported that "the maintenance of reliable electricity supplies to central London involves considerable challenges unique to the local environment. Very high (and rapidly growing) densely packed demand using ageing infrastructure creates resilience problems."

Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson's recent Infrastructure Plan 2050 admits that the capital suffers from "a backlog of capital investment, historically low levels of investment compared to other countries, relatively poor perception and performance of our infrastructure in comparison with our international city peer group of world-class cities and continually growing and changing expectations … "

This situation does not just apply to London. The UK has been ranked 28th on perceptions of "quality of overall infrastructure" (the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness, 2013-2014 report) and saddled with "historic levels of underinvestment" (CBI/KPMG infrastructure survey, September 2013).

The systematic transfer of vital public infrastructures

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into the hands of predatory private firms, as well as deregulation, can only produce a steady rise in incidents such as last week's pavement explosion.

UKPN is part of Hong Kong-based Cheung Kong Holdings, owned by Asia's richest businessman, Li Ka-shing. Last year, UKPN was accused of avoiding an estimated £38 million in British taxes over the previous three years by channelling £164 million via the Cayman Islands, the British overseas territory tax haven in the Caribbean, to other companies controlled by Li. Earlier this year, Li restructured his global business empire, incorporating it in the Cayman Islands instead of Hong Kong to take advantage of what are called "preferential revenue policies."

In February, the UK Parliament's Energy and Climate Change Select Committee completed its inquiry into energy network costs criticising the regulator, Ofgem, for not delivering "value for energy customers." They agreed that the price UKPN and other power companies can charge is "too generous" and the targets they have to meet are "too low."

Since the 2010 election, the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition government has cut state funding of the HSE by over 40 percent, making hundreds of workers redundant, and has set up three reviews to look at the "burden" of health and safety regulation and has drastically cut inspections.

The latest London explosion is a symptom of a neglected and rotting infrastructure.

No step forward is possible while the control of vast resources, critical to the functioning of a mass, complex modern society, remain in the hands of a class who are interested in nothing else except the bottom line. While billions of pounds can be poured into the City of London's banks or made available for illegal wars, the cost of public health provision, education, social housing and basic infrastructure is deemed prohibitively expensive.

Only when social need, not private profit, becomes the organising principle of production and all aspects of social life will the extraordinary human and technical resources that are now available be utilised to provide a decent living standard and safe environment for all.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the general election to raise the demand for an end to the anarchy and wastefulness of the profit system, which is the real cause of the Holborn explosion, and to fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.

Our manifesto calls for the cancellation of all debts to the international financial institutions and the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

We say that control of society's wealth must be taken from the billionaires and used to meet essential social needs. All austerity measures must be reversed and billions poured into the economy to end unemployment and provide decent paying jobs, free and high-quality health care, housing, education and social services for all.

For further details visit: www.socialequality.org.uk

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