UK: Two homeless people die in fire in derelict Manchester building

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Firefighters found the charred remains of two homeless people after they were called in the early hours of the morning last Friday to a blaze in the Chinatown area of central Manchester.

The two were males, with the *Guardian* reporting Tuesday that they were known locally as Wayne and James. They were found on the first floor of a derelict warehouse building on Nicholas Street, near the Chinatown Imperial Arch. Greater Manchester Police said Tuesday they had yet to formally identify the victims, with the nature of their injuries a major factor.

The empty building was often frequented by rough sleepers. The fire was so intense that it destroyed the top floors of the listed building. When fire and rescue crews returned to the scene Tuesday, the devastation was such that they were unable to confirm that no one else had been in the building at the time of the blaze. Although the cause of the fire is not yet known, it is thought the homeless may have lit a fire for warmth against freezing temperatures. Another possible cause being reported is that the victims may have kicked a candle over while asleep.

There was a fire in the same building a fortnight ago. On that occasion a homeless man emerged wrapped in a blanket and blackened by smoke.

Labour Party MP for Manchester Central Lucy Powell declared, “Successive Tory [Conservative] and Tory/Liberal Democratic governments have overseen a drastic increase in homelessness as well as savage cuts to ... services which support people who are homeless.”

Simon Danczuk, another Labour MP from nearby Rochdale, said, “We are seeing homelessness increase to levels we last saw in the 1990s under the last Conservative government.”

While they were both quick to blame the Conservatives for the swingeing cuts to local government spending, including housing and support services for the homeless, both MPs were silent on the role of Labour, which has implemented every attack on housing and austerity cut demanded by the Tories. All five of Manchester’s MPs are Labour members and the party also holds 95 out of 96 seats on Manchester City Council.

In the aftermath of the fire, Manchester Labour councillor Paul Andrews made a hypocritical appeal to “anyone who is sleeping rough ... please come and access the help and support available. We will find you somewhere safe to stay.”

The reality is local authorities are not legally bound to help people presenting themselves as homeless at their local town hall. The 1997 Labour government of Tony Blair retained the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act, which introduced the “priority” hurdle that a homeless applicant has to fulfil in order to obtain temporary accommodation from the council.

It is not enough to be homeless to be regarded as vulnerable or eligible for help. Single people are particularly at risk. Those deemed eligible for assistance might be able to stay in temporary accommodation or a hostel. Groups classed as vulnerable, such as families, pregnant women and the ill and disabled, may be passed on to Social Services.

Labour councils have been in the forefront of demonizing the homeless and utilising the full weight of the law to thwart their attempts to find any temporary shelter. Leader of Manchester City Council Sir Richard Leese recently wrote on his blog that 80 percent of those begging on the streets of Manchester were not really homeless. He even claimed that people commute from London to beg on the streets of Manchester, with “the most likely beneficiaries … the nearest drug dealers.”

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In 2014, the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition introduced Public Space Protection Orders (PSBOs), on the pretext of granting councils more powers to deal with "anti-social behaviour." Councils have frequently used the orders to prevent homeless people from setting up tents in city centres.

Far from finding the homeless "somewhere safe to stay," last year Manchester City Council were granted an injunction to send in bailiffs to break up a "tent city" in the town centre. This had provided shelter at one point for up to 40 homeless people.

The homeless and their tents were also driven off land owned by Manchester University, at two separate locations.

Last month in nearby Salford, homeless man Chris Blaine was jailed by magistrates for two months, following a 10-hour rooftop protest on the former Ducie Bridge pub. Blaine pleaded guilty in court to the charge that he had resisted a court officer executing a process to repossess the empty building.

The pub had been occupied by 30 homeless people, including a 19-year-old pregnant woman who had been squatting there for the last two months.

Blaine had climbed onto the roof of the building, following the eviction of the squatters by bailiffs, to demonstrate the plight of the homeless. He told the *Salford Star* newspaper, "I'm on the roof in protest at the Co-op, NOMA and Manchester City Council ... they would rather see the homeless dying in doorways."

High Court proceedings were brought by the development group NOMA and its owners, the Co-operative Group. The Ducie pub is on a 20-acre site that NOMA and the Co-op are developing into office and retail space worth £800 million in the largest development in the UK outside South East England.

The *Salford Star*, following a Freedom of Information request, revealed that Manchester City Council has spent over £12 million funding the NOMA redevelopment project, with surrounding areas receiving nearly £7 million of European Union funding to pay for road infrastructure works and a general facelift.

The Manchester deaths highlight the increasingly desperate housing situation facing many people in the UK. Whatever the weather, in the towns and cities of the UK one finds homeless persons everywhere, with many huddled in building doorways.

The enormous rise in the number of homeless corresponds almost exactly with the onset of mass austerity following the bailout of the financial elite in the 2008 global crash. The official figures tallied by local councils have always been downplayed and underestimated. But even these show a startling increase. The number of people sleeping rough in Manchester has increased tenfold since 2010, when the council's annual rough sleeper count recorded seven on one night. In comparison, 70 people were logged in the most recent count on the same evening last December, up from 43 in 2014.

The Shelter housing charity this month stated that 120,000 children alone will be homeless this Christmas.

Huge swathes of central Manchester, as with many major cities in the UK, are being redeveloped with office, leisure, retail facilities and hotels, while thousands of people—the victims of decades of brutal austerity measures—are sleeping in the streets with nowhere to go. Huge numbers are languishing on housing waiting lists, with virtually zero prospect of being adequately housed.

While there is money for business opportunities that only benefit the rich minority, more than £100 billion in austerity cuts have been slashed from essential services over the last six years to pay for the bailout of the banks.

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