

Social inequality and the Grenfell Tower inferno

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The Grenfell Tower fire in London is an event that sums up all that is rotten in contemporary capitalist society—not just in Britain, but throughout the world.

Over 100 people—the final toll could go much higher—were burnt to death because they were working class and poor. They were murdered in clear sight of some of the richest people in the world by a ruling elite driven by an insatiable appetite for the money to be made through swindling, theft and social vandalism.

The inexorable growth of social inequality surpasses anything previously seen in history. Nearly a third of Londoners live in poverty, and most of these are working. The rich and the poor live cheek by jowl, but they might as well live on different planets.

Global speculation in London housing is such that there are 20,000 “ghost homes,” worth multiple millions, which have never been occupied by their owners, while the £675,000 average price puts a house out of reach for millions.

Grenfell Tower residents lived in a death trap built in one of the most deprived areas of the UK, situated within its wealthiest constituency, where the average price of a terrace house is over £4 million.

The Conservative-run authority, instead of making Grenfell Tower safer, presided over a cosmetic facelift to make the property less of an eyesore to the borough’s rich residents and ensure that their property values weren’t negatively impacted.

The companies involved, Rydon and Harley Facades, installed cheap aluminium and polyethylene panels that were not fire-resistant—in order to save £5,000. No sprinklers were installed.

Chancellor Philip Hammond has admitted that the materials used are supposed to be banned. Yet it was the Tory government that created the basis for this type of criminal behaviour through a process of deregulation

of housing safety rules and the suppression of a series of safety recommendations made after previous fires.

Three years ago, then-London Mayor Boris Johnson closed ten fire stations, with the loss of 552 fire fighters’ jobs and 14 engines. He told those who questioned his decision to “get stuffed.”

But the genesis of mass murder at Grenfell Tower must be sought earlier still. Those who stand indicted include Margaret Thatcher, who began the process of transforming Britain into a social desert and London into a playground of the rich; Tony Blair, who set about completing the “Thatcher Revolution,” including the selling off of one million council houses while building a £27 million property portfolio for himself; and David Cameron, who declared an “age of austerity” for the working class and a “bonfire of regulations” for his friends in the City, in Britain’s boardrooms, and among the landlords who infest the Tory Party.

To do justice to the vileness of it all, it would take a modern-day Engels, the man who wrote:

What is true of London is true of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, is true of all great towns. Everywhere barbarous indifference, hard egotism on one hand, and nameless misery on the other, everywhere social warfare, every man’s house in a state of siege, everywhere reciprocal plundering under the protection of the law, and all so shameless, so openly avowed that one shrinks before the consequences of our social state as they manifest themselves here undisguised, and can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together.

If it “hangs together” still, it is only because the outpouring of rage at what has occurred finds no political expression. Thousands have taken to the streets to demand May’s resignation and call for the guilty to be brought to justice. They have met May’s promise to hold a public inquiry with denunciations of yet another cover-up.

It is under these circumstances that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn issued an open letter to May lending his support to her inquiry. His letter offers our “Dear Prime Minister” Labour’s support for her promised “full and independent public inquiry”—with the sole proviso that it “will be held under the provisions of the 2005 Inquiries Act.”

This inquiry is a fraud. Amnesty International urged all members of the British judiciary not to serve on any inquiry held under the Act’s auspices because it would “be controlled by the executive which is empowered to block public scrutiny of state actions.”

Tens of thousands have signed a petition expressing no confidence in such a public inquiry, agreeing with Sophie Khan, the solicitor who represented victims of a 2009 tower block fire in Camberwell, who said, “I’m very concerned as to why Mrs. May came out so quickly to say ‘public inquiry.’ What is there that she knows that needs to be hidden?”

Corbyn makes no mention of this. Instead, he suggests in the most obsequious terms that the inquiry should have Terms of Reference of “sufficient scope...to ensure that all necessary lessons are learned.”

He never once denounces the cover-up being carried out by the government, or its role in events leading to the Grenfell Tower inferno. Instead, he politely asserts his belief that “the policies and priorities of your government in the arenas of social housing and public safety are legitimate targets for my criticism.” He then adds, no less cringingly, “I hope we both share a determination to discover the truths underpinning this tragedy,” and then appeals for an “early consultation” with May.

The only practical measure he proposes is that May provide “information regarding further funding plans” on top of the measly £5 million announced so far, and urges her to demonstrate “an attitude of generosity and compassion in relation to the costs of funeral expenses and ensuring that it is possible for families living outside the UK to travel here to attend funerals, as well

as participate in the inquiry.”

Reality here defies satire. Corbyn wants nothing more than to once again appear “reasonable” to the ruling class at a time when their favoured government is teetering on the edge of collapse and he is submitting himself and the Labour Party as an alternative. Heaven forbid he might be accused of responding to widespread public outrage and giving it political direction!

What would any genuine workers’ leader say at such a time?

He would ask why the guilty, including Johnson, the Tory leaders of the council and all those involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, have not been arrested and questioned.

He would draw up a list of those who should be charged and publish it far and wide.

Above all, he would insist that the minority Conservative government had no right to rule and demand its immediate resignation.

He would advance a socialist programme of radical redistributive measures to address the social nightmare created by capitalism.

Corbyn has done none of this. The minimal reforms he advances are determined by what he calculates can be afforded within the parameters of the existing social order—what the ruling class can reasonably be expected to give back to those whom it has plundered in order to preserve social peace.

The criminal looting of the wealth of society is not simply the responsibility of a few bad people. It is the expression of the very essence of capitalist society, which is based on ruthless class exploitation in which, as Marx insisted, “Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole...”

The struggle against social inequality and the horrors it produces is the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of the profit system.



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