

Grenfell Tower fire victims and survivors treated with contempt by UK authorities

Robert Stevens**22 June 2017**

Those who perished in horrific deaths and the survivors of the Grenfell Tower inferno—which has killed at least 79 people—are overwhelmingly poor and working-class.

Their deaths were the result of the policies of successive governments, going back nearly four decades, through which the social rights of working people, including the right to safe housing, have been eviscerated.

Numerous representatives of the political elite and their media backers have engaged in handwringing and mock indignation over the fate of the victims. Their real attitude, however, is shown in the way that the survivors and their families have been treated by the authorities, with undisguised class hatred and contempt.

This is sanctioned from the very top of government. For days, there was no governmental or local authority assistance for the victims. It took two days for Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May to make a 30-minute visit to the site, where she was kept away from the public on “security” grounds. Only after the awareness of growing anger in London and nationwide finally hit home in ruling circles was an emergency relief fund initiated. This was after public donations had already raised more than £3 million—totally independently of the government.

The official “Grenfell Tower Residents’ Discretionary Fund” is a pittance of just £5 million. Of this, a minuscule £500 is being made available as an upfront payment to those who were burnt out of their homes. Another £5,000 is supposedly to be transferred into their bank accounts, which many cannot access, as their entire possessions went up in flames. As of Tuesday, the £5 million has barely been touched, with one news channel reporting that a total of just £330,000 has been paid out to survivors.

This is approximately half of the amount spent on refurbishing the Tower with the combustible cladding that almost certainly enabled the fire to spread with such devastating speed.

Moreover, it stands in stark contrast to the £369 million in taxpayers’ money that has been granted to the Royal Family for a 10-year refurbishing of Buckingham Palace, which

stands in the same London borough. The lives of 80 people, if not many more, and the destitution of an untold number displaced—who have lost everything they possessed—is valued at just a tiny fraction of the amount being lavished on one family, already amongst the most privileged in the country.

The work on the Queen’s official residence, estimated to be worth £2.2 billion, will include replacing cables, lead pipes, wiring and boilers. When it was announced last year, a statement from Buckingham Palace read, “An independent specialist report concluded that without urgent work there is a risk of serious damage to the palace and the precious royal collection items it houses from, amongst other scenarios, fire and water damage.”

No such concerns ever crossed the minds of those in power responsible for Grenfell Tower, and the fate of around 600 people, who were left without the most basic safety requirements, including a central fire alarm and sprinkler system.

It was clear to all from the very outset that the fire was a major catastrophe requiring a massive emergency response. Yet no such co-ordinated action was organised by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council—despite it being the wealthiest local authority in the country—to offer emergency respite, including the provision of food, drink, warmth and shelter to those devastated by the crisis. This was their response to working class people, some of whom fled the blaze in terror wearing just t-shirts and their underwear.

It was the local population and others who rushed to the area, coming from as far afield as Birmingham, to organize support and help for those who fled the inferno. Many of those assisting were visibly shocked at the lack of any official emergency operation, complaining they had worked for days providing food, clothes and shelter, with no assistance from the authorities.

The inaction of the RBKC meant that hundreds of people made homeless by the fire, including those who lived in rented social housing adjacent to Grenfell—told to vacate

their homes on safety grounds—were not provided with any proper alternative accommodation. Instead many were dumped at the nearby “official rescue centre”—Westway Sport and Fitness Centre. Here they were forced to sleep on the sports hall floor, on rubber mats with sleeping bags and makeshift pillows.

Seeing their plight, many Londoners offered survivors rooms in their houses and access to food, drinks and shower facilities.

Rather than provide decent accommodation for the victims and demand government step in to ensure it, RBKC has sent around 250 of those affected by the fire to stay temporarily in dingy hotels all over the capital.

Speaking to ITV’s *Peston on Sunday* show, West London film producer Nisha Parti, who has been helping victims of the fire, said, “Victims were going to hotels, arriving at hotels, with no one from the council to greet them, to check them in, to give them clothes and food.” Parti revealed that Kensington and Chelsea council were giving just £10 a day to the survivors on arrival at the hotels, an amount even lower than the daily amount allotted in welfare payments to the unemployed. This barely allowed its destitute recipients to pay for a sandwich and a beverage.

Reports also emerged that RBKC council were sending Grenfell and nearby residents into accommodation miles away from London. The council denied claims that people have been sent outside of central London.

This however is contradicted by accounts, including the detailed statement given by one survivor, who lived in a flat on Grenfell’s 17th floor and who managed to escape from the blaze with his aunt.

In a video widely shared on social media, the young man explained that, “Another guy, they took him out of the hotel [the council originally sent him to] and they sent him to Preston...They [the council] are putting pressure on people that if you don’t accept their offer [of accommodation] you are making yourself intentionally homeless.”

He also revealed that one of his neighbours—whose wife had died in the fire and who “was in a terrible place right now and losing it”—was “put in an old people’s home. He’s not going to get rehoused now. That’s it.”

He continued, “They are doing some disgusting things. They are cutting corners and we are already scared about what’s going to happen to us.”

By announcing the fund, May was acknowledging the scale of opposition that was developing against her pro-austerity government and the ruling elite, fuelled by the blatant refusal of the government and the Conservative-run local authority to assist survivors. May said, “Frankly, the support on the ground for families who needed help or basic information in the initial hours after this appalling disaster

was not good enough.”

Yet even as she was forced to state this, after denying it for days, May would not guarantee those made homeless would be rehoused in the borough, only that “as far as possible” they would be placed “within the borough or neighbouring boroughs. Some people may actually want to go to another part of London.”

Shortly after May’s statement, furious local residents descended on Kensington Town Hall to demand “Justice for Grenfell” and that those suffering be afforded basic, civilised treatment. Thousands more participated in a demonstration that marched through central London.

The Labour MP for Kensington, Emma Dent Coad, told the BBC’s *Sunday Politics* show, “We are still hearing stories of people not being allocated properly. There’s one woman this morning and her child, they have been moved three times since Wednesday into different accommodation.”

On Tuesday evening, almost a week after the fire, Sky News reported that a number of survivors were still sleeping in the Westway Centre. They feared, it reported, that if they went elsewhere council officials would wash their hands of them entirely and prevent them from being rehoused in the borough. Sky reported that it had been told that a number of people were sleeping in cars and even in parks since the fire and had received no assistance.

The callous disregard for human suffering by the powers that be and the humiliating treatment that survivors have been subjected to over the past week is an object lesson in the real priorities of the ruling elite.

The terrible, entirely preventable, catastrophe unleashed on the Grenfell residents and the working-class community around it reveals the true face of a society in which a sated layer of multi-millionaires and billionaires wallow in unimaginable wealth and privilege while working people are condemned to live in death traps.



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