

The political implications of the Grenfell Tower fire

Chris Marsden**27 June 2017**

There are events in world history that lead to a fundamental change in consciousness and create the basis for developing a socialist political orientation among broad masses of workers. The June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno is such an event.

In years to come it will be necessary to refer to the political life of Britain in terms of “before” and “after” Grenfell. This is because the tragedy has so cruelly exposed the underlying reality of social relations between the classes—and it did so in London, one of the richest cities in the world, and in London’s richest constituency.

Grenfell is a national disaster. Thirteen days after Britain’s deadliest fire for over 100 years, there is still no official acknowledgement of the numbers killed—either because the powers-that-be dare not admit to the death toll or they are so indifferent to the lives of Grenfell’s residents that they simply do not know.

Every day brings fresh accounts of the unprecedented scale of the disaster—of residents perishing without hope of rescue, firefighters describing scenes of an apocalypse, the anguish of survivors, relatives and local residents.

Hundreds of thousands have had their lives and those of their children placed in danger. There are 600 residential council tower blocks with the same cladding and insulation that turned a small fire into an all-consuming conflagration. Every single sample from 75 tower blocks thus far examined has proven unsafe.

Now 30,000 schools are under investigation, as well as hospitals, student residence halls, hotels and a football stadium. There is yet to be a serious investigation of offices, shopping centres or other commercial properties.

Grenfell has assumed international dimensions. The fire was anticipated by similar but, by chance alone,

less tragic blazes involving cladding in at least 20 major high rises all over the world. The US producer of the cladding, Arconic, formerly known as Alcoa, marketed products to the UK that have been banned in America for almost two decades and are prohibited in Europe. Fire experts are warning that UK building regulations are used as a template in the Middle East and in ex-British Commonwealth countries.

Little wonder that people not only in Britain, but around the world are in a state of shock at what has occurred. So vast is the tragedy and so overwhelming are its implications. Many are still trying to assimilate all that has occurred and all that has been exposed.

But the shock the tragedy has produced is mixed with outrage. Millions understand that Grenfell was not an accident, but a crime. It was the entirely predictable result of four decades of deregulation by successive Conservative and Labour governments and their local representatives, all of whom are culpable in mass murder.

One hundred—and perhaps many more—people have burned to death solely because they are poor and working class in a society in which the only people deemed to matter are the super-rich.

The horrifying loss of life epitomises the devastation capitalism has wrought on generations of working people. It is the outcome of a vast and ongoing transfer of society’s wealth from the poor to the rich.

The burnt-out husk of the tower points an accusing finger at the criminality of the political sociopath Margaret Thatcher and all those who followed her—Blair, Brown, Cameron, May—in an orgy of social vandalism designed to line the pockets and fill the coffers of the global elite.

In this cause, they contrived to slash essential services—including the decimation of London’s fire

service by former mayor, now foreign secretary, Boris Johnson—junk safety regulations, and ignore warnings from investigations into similar UK fires beginning in 1999, including Lakandal House in 2009.

Repeated efforts by Grenfell residents to raise the alarm over the dangerous conditions in the tower—especially regarding the supposed “refurbishment” carried out by a Tory council and the companies it hired—were not only ignored, but those who made them were threatened with legal action.

Grenfell has exposed the absurdities of politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation. In the universal reaction of sympathy and solidarity the fire has engendered and the hatred expressed towards the guilty, we see the reassertion of class as the fundamental division in society.

The countless statements by local people who blame Grenfell on the treatment of the poor and the working class express a growing recognition that the struggle against social inequality demands a unified response by all working people against their common enemy.

It is the bitter experience of previous decades that has given rise to what appears as an explosive leap in the political consciousness of working people.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the 1905 revolution in Russia, the class struggle there was pushed back for several years and political reaction appeared triumphant. This all changed following the 1912 massacre of 250 striking workers in the Lena goldfield. The massacre had a catalytic impact, arousing the latent, suppressed hostility of the Russian masses to the existing order and sparking a wave of mass strikes and a re-eruption of revolutionary sentiment.

Workers in the UK and throughout the world have lived through a far more extended period during which the socialist consciousness of workers and the class struggle itself were suppressed. Millions of people paid the price for this in the decimation of their jobs, wages and living conditions and by suffering a quarter century of uninterrupted war in one country after another.

But this too is coming to an end. A new historical stage is opening in which workers and youth are being reminded just why it was necessary for the Bolshevik party to lead the masses in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist reaction in October 1917—and why this heroic struggle won the support of so many in the UK.

This weekend, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn spoke

before 200,000 people at Glastonbury. In his speech he asked, “Is it right that so many people are frightened of where they live at the moment, having seen the horrors of what happened at Grenfell Tower?”

Corbyn cited Shelley’s famous injunction to workers, made in response to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre: “Rise like lions after slumber.”

But he wants the working class to lie down like lambs. His aim is to stifle popular outrage and restore social peace, as epitomised by his priestly call for the “unity” of “intelligent human beings.” That is why he supports the efforts of Prime Minister Theresa May to direct anger over Grenfell into the safe channels of a public inquiry—out of which, he maintains, several years from now some carefully costed and insignificant reforms will emerge.

In reality, there can be no answer to the vast social catastrophe exposed by Grenfell other than by means of a political offensive to end the domination of the financial oligarchy and its political parties over society. How can millions of homes, schools, hospitals and other public buildings be made safe other than through the seizure of the wealth and assets of the super-rich? How else can so many criminals in high places be brought to justice?

The spirit of opposition to the entire existing social order so falsely invoked by Corbyn is genuinely embodied only in the revolutionary perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International. It is to this party that the working class must now turn.



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