

On-the-spot report from London:

## Residents in Camden speak about Grenfell fire and their evacuation due to fire risk

Our reporters  
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*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to **Nancy Martin** who was among the residents evacuated from the Taplow tower block on the Chalcots Estate in London by Labour Party-run Camden council over the weekend.

The Fire Brigade advised the evacuation of around 4,000 people due to multiple fire risks in four of five blocks on the estate.

The blocks are enclosed in the same flammable cladding as that of Grenfell Tower, which assisted in the spread of a small fire that rapidly became an inferno. The June 14 fire killed at least 79 people and the death toll is expected to rise.

The cladding on the Chalcots Estate was due to be taken down before the decision was made to entirely evacuate the blocks. According to the council, it will take weeks for the necessary remedial work to be carried out on the high rises.

Along with some of the other evacuees, Nancy Martin has been forced to stay temporarily at a hotel, where she spoke to WSWs reporters. She was there with a friend, Lana, who had flown to the UK to spend this weekend with her.

Nancy described how she heard that her block was to be evacuated last Friday. “I did some shopping and came back around 4 o’clock. I spoke to our housing officer because there wasn’t much communication in terms of timescales, when they are doing something [to the cladding on the tower blocks]... how long it was going to last, and when do they start? There was not really much communication about that at all.

“After a quick chat, I went upstairs. Later I went out and had a drink with a friend in a pub. We came back upstairs around 7:30PM and I got a phone call from my

son saying he had heard on the news that we were being evacuated. I thought, ‘Great, no one has actually told me anything!’ It was a couple of hours later that someone came and knocked on my door saying we were going to be evacuated.

“We decided to stay that night because there was nowhere to go. The sports centre was open but I wasn’t going to spend all night in a sports centre waiting to be sent somewhere. They just said the building was unsafe, if I recall correctly. They didn’t explain in detail why it was unsafe.”

Nancy explained that it was only the following day that she found out. It “wasn’t just the cladding,” she said, “it was that the gas pipes are faulty. The Fire Brigade advised it wasn’t safe and we had to be evacuated.”

She said the block had been “refurbished” with the unsafe cladding in “2008 but it started in 2006,” so she had been living in an unsafe block for nearly a decade.

Asked what she thought about high-rise flats being clad in combustible material, Nancy said, “Someone definitely should be in prison.”

“Whoever signed the papers in the council that this particular material should be used for our blocks should be held responsible and brought to account for his or her actions.

“I don’t see the logic in a company even proposing two types of material for the high-rise blocks. One that is fire resistant and the other that isn’t. What’s the point? If you are not supposed to be using non-fire resistant materials on properties higher than whatever metres, you shouldn’t even be suggesting that as an option.”

When asked what she thought of such a fire occurring

in the UK in the 21st century, Nancy replied, “Britain is a wealthy country and for this to happen is appalling, frankly. This is happening to working people, not the wealthy.”

Nancy, who manages a department at the University of London, continued, “We are professional people but I work for a living and I am a working-class person. It’s interesting this is happening to this strata of society, not in the Docklands in expensive flats.”

**Deborah Cook** is a pensioner who was moved from the Bray tower block building on the Chalcots Estate to the hotel.

“I was only informed we had to evacuate by a phone call from a member of the family, and then I saw it on television,” she said. “We weren’t told why, just that the building is unsafe and we had to get out.

“All the family had to stay last night in this hotel in one room with the dogs we have as well. My daughter has agoraphobia and is really distressed.

“We were told it was about the cladding but it’s not really just that. Now we are told it’s the [exposed] gas pipes as well as the cladding. Why is this happening in London today? It’s Third World stuff.

“We are still unclear about why we can’t go back, and this hotel is dreadful. We have not been told how long it will take to do the [repair] work.

“We were given one towel for the whole family. If we want a drink, we have to buy it from the hotel while at home we can do it ourselves. I can’t live like this. They told us the work won’t begin until the people who refuse to leave [the tower blocks] are gotten out. The work was done eight years ago and we were still in our properties when it was being done around us. Why can’t they do this now? I need to go back to do my washing, to get some clothes, just the basics. Who signed off on this [cladding and allowed the Bray block and the other Camden towers to be unsafe and at risk of fire]? Who let this happen?”



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