

The human cost of capitalism: The Grenfell fire and the poisoning of Flint, Michigan

Jerry White
29 June 2017

London, England, a city of 8.7 million residents and home of the largest concentration of billionaires in the world, may at first glance contrast sharply with the impoverished city of Flint, Michigan, a symbol of America's "Rust Belt," where the residents have been fighting lead poisoning for more than three years.

However, in both London and Flint—and cities throughout the globe—modern-day capitalism is condemning the working class to impossible conditions and an early grave.

More than two weeks since the June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno, authorities continue to conceal the real number of victims and full scope of this social crime. The police, who raised the official death toll to 80 on Wednesday, now say that they will not have an accurate count until sometime next year. This callous treatment underscores the contempt of the ruling class, which views the Grenfell residents as little more than "collateral damage" in a class war against the working class and poor.

On Wednesday, local councilors, alleging that they could face the "risk of disruption," barred Grenfell survivors from the Kensington and Chelsea council cabinet meeting, which was to hear a report on the blaze. Meanwhile, the government of Theresa May is preparing an inquiry that will be nothing but a cover-up for the complicity of both the Tory and Labour politicians who have overseen the decades of deregulation and austerity that produced this disaster.

While London has become a global capital for financial and real estate speculation, and the home of 86 billionaires, the city's working-class and low-income residents have been piled into death traps like the Grenfell Tower, which lacked the most elementary safety protections, including smoke alarms, sprinkler systems and multiple escape routes.

The safety complaints of Grenfell residents were ignored while local councilors installed cladding on the outside of the building to assuage the concerns of the affluent who considered the low-income apartment building an eyesore that could drive down the value of their multimillion-pound homes and investment properties.

Like London, the residents of Flint are the victims of a social crime motivated by the mad pursuit of profit by wealthy investors and their politically connected cronies. In this case, officials from the administration of Rick Snyder, a multimillionaire Republican governor, and his Democratic state treasurer, former investment banker Andy Dillon, engineered a scheme to enrich private contractors and wealthy bondholders by building a new water pipeline from Lake Huron, bypassing the Detroit-based system upon which Flint had relied for decades. This entailed switching the city's water supply to untreated water from the polluted Flint River.

As in London, state and local officials in Michigan ignored the protests of Flint residents who complained that the discolored and foul-smelling water was making their children sick. The poisoned water resulted in the deaths of at least 12 residents from Legionnaires' disease, ill health for adults and lifelong learning disabilities for the city's children.

After more than three years of bogus promises from officials all the way to President Obama, residents have seen no relief. Instead, state and local officials have ended water subsidies, resumed mass shutoffs for nonpayment, and are wrapping up the distribution of free bottled water.

Earlier this week, an unelected financial review board, acting on behalf of the banks and big investors, unanimously voted to overturn a one-year moratorium

on imposing tax liens on the homes of residents who fail or refuse to pay for water that is still tainted with lead and other toxins. If residents do not pay up, the county or city will seize the homes to pay off nearly \$85 million owed to bondholders cashing in on the pipeline construction project.

Grenfell and Flint are not natural disasters. They are man-made crimes that are products of decades of deregulation, austerity and other free-market policies that have led to a massive transfer of wealth and an oligarchic concentration of political power not seen since the Gilded Age.

Such events are becoming commonplace around the globe. In Pakistan last Sunday, more than 150 impoverished villagers perished after they rushed to collect leaking fuel from a crashed tanker truck, which suddenly exploded. In New York City, scores of public transit passengers barely escaped deadly injuries after their subway train derailed. The antiquated signal system dates back to 1904, in a city that is home to the world's second-largest number of billionaires, although it lost one last year when he moved to the White House.

Writing in his 1845 work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels condemned the British ruling class for “social murder” due to the fetid water supplies, cramped housing and disease that afflicted working-class districts in Manchester and other cities:

When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual...

century, every aspect of life, including water, has been “monetized” and made the vehicle for financial speculation. It has become a matter of urgent public health and safety to expropriate the ill-gotten gains of these social murderers and stop the squandering of society's resources on their mansions, private jets and tropical islands.

A massive economic and social commitment is required to replace the flammable cladding on thousands of residential buildings in the United Kingdom and other countries where it has been used, and the lead pipes not only in Flint but around the country. The immense resources that are required for this life-and-death work will not be attained by appealing to the conscience of the ruling elites—as the Jeremy Corbys and Bernie Sanders of the world claim—but only through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class to end the economic and political stranglehold of the financial parasites and abolish the capitalist profit system upon which their wealth and power is based.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Under the modern capitalist system of the 21st