

Thames Water workers speak:

Privatisation contributed to Grenfell Tower inferno

Paul Mitchell
14 July 2017

A BBC Newsnight investigation reveals that firefighters struggled with water pressure problems during the fire at Grenfell Tower on June 14. It states that Thames Water had to be asked to increase pressure in the area.

One firefighter told Newsnight, “The fire floors we went in were helmet-meltingly hot ... When we were clearing flats, it was a case of a quick look and closing doors because the water pressure wasn’t up to firefighting.”

A spokesperson for Thames Water rejected the allegations, declaring, “We’ve been supporting the emergency services’ response in every way possible. ... any suggestion there was low pressure or that Thames Water did not supply enough water to fire services during this appalling tragedy is categorically false.”

However, a former Thames Water (TW) worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company spokesperson was seeking to deflect any investigation into a deliberate policy pursued by Thames Water and other companies over the last 15 years to reduce water pressure to cut down leakage from water mains. Countless warnings have been made about the implications of the policy, including for fire safety.

The TW worker explained, “Historically, London’s water supply had a pressure of 3-5 bar. Pressure of one bar will get water to the third floor of a building and 3-5 bar to the top of a high rise like Grenfell Tower. For higher buildings, you have to install pumps and tanks and, of course, regularly inspect and maintain them. All additional costs.

“Around the year 2000, Thames Water, facing huge criticism from the media, politicians and the regulator for the scale of leakage from its water network, had the

bright idea of reducing the pressure in addition to a programme of mains replacement. The aim was to reduce pressure to about 2 bar. There was even talk of reducing it to 1 bar—the legal minimum.

“There were huge arguments in Thames Water and outside about the effect on buildings, sprinkler systems, fire hydrants, boilers and other machinery constructed on the basis of having water supplied at 3-5 bar pressure. These would all have to be investigated and then upgraded or replaced.

“In effect, Thames Water was transferring its own costs of cutting leakage to the owners of such assets, including local councils who owned hundreds of tower blocks with hundreds of thousands of council tenants.

“Years of argument followed, with Thames Water saying that legally they only had to supply water of ‘sufficient’ pressure to the boundary of a property. Owners would have to pay for new pumps and equipment. The councils objected. Thames Water had to pay. There was an agreement of sorts made, but I believe the ‘who pays’ argument is still rumbling on.

“In the case of Grenfell Tower, I don’t know what the pressure situation was when it was first built or if it was affected by the pressure reduction programme. That would have to be investigated. But it seems there was a problem given what the firefighters said in Newsnight.

“It’s also interesting that the Grenfell Action Group refer to Thames Water’s own concerns about the capacity of the network to deliver sufficient water to the area when the new school [Kensington Academy, opened in 2016] was built at the foot of the tower block. They said the developer had to make sure they didn’t deprive surrounding areas of water. I wonder if

that was ever done?"

There have been many reports published that confirm what the former TW worker says.

In 2004, the Association of London Government Housing Steering Group reported concerns of falling water pressure and TW's plans to cut it further. It complained that the company "expect councils and other property owners" to pay for new pumps and other infrastructure to overcome the problem.

The report quoted from a TW letter to Waltham Forest Council in April 2004 which declared, "Thames Water has over the years supplied water at sufficiently high pressure to reach the top of the high-rise buildings in the London area. This was beyond the pressures required by the Law governing the levels of service that Thames Water had to provide. The high pressures have contributed to increased rates of leakage in the water supply network and Thames Water can reduce leakage in the water network by reducing pressure to the levels required by law."

In March 2005, the London Assembly Health and Public Services Committee repeated councils' concerns in a report called "Under pressure." In a section titled "Impact on the Fire Service," it says that the London Fire & Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) was "concerned that lower water pressure could make ineffective water sprinklers and also fire hydrants.

"A National Guidance Document on the Provision of Water for Firefighting (agreed between the Local Government Association and Water UK in 2002) sets out guidance for water flow rates for fire-fighting in a range of situations. We understand from LFEPA that Thames Water has so far refused to commit to the guidance rates."

In 2006, the London Councils Housing Directors Group estimated approximately 657 council buildings would be affected by pressure reductions, 48 of them owned by Kensington and Chelsea Council, which was responsible for Grenfell Tower.

There is no record in the public domain of Kensington and Chelsea's response to these concerns or whether Grenfell Tower was one of the 48 buildings identified.

In neighbouring Westminster City Council, almost a decade later, the council was still in dispute with Thames Water. A report produced by the council's housing arm, CityWest Homes, in April 2015, revealed

that Thames Water had offered to pay the full cost of installing pumps in high rise buildings, but the council would not do so because "accepting Thames Water's offer at these premises will incur future maintenance, running and replacement costs."

The report complained, "Meanwhile, it is obvious that after more than 10 years of supply failures through reducing pressures, Thames Water remains in denial of its domestic supply obligations and is ready to blame the City Council and CityWest Homes for not installing pumps to safeguard properties requiring a street pressure of more than 1 bar."

As the former TW worker explained, the shoehorning of the Kensington Academy, objected to by the Grenfell Action Group, into the small open space next to the tower block, and refurbishment of the adjoining Sports Centre, with its three new swimming pools, could have compromised the local water supply.

When the council first announced the Academy development, TW wrote to the planning department saying it should impose "a Grampian style condition" on the developers—the council itself and co-sponsors the Aldridge Foundation. The "Grampian condition" means developers have to investigate the effect of their development on the surrounding area and make improvement to infrastructure, if necessary, before they begin work on the site.

The likelihood that water pressure reductions contributed to the social murder at Grenfell Tower is a consequence of the privatisation and deregulation policies of successive Conservative and Labour governments. In 2006, the WSWS warned that the takeover of TW by the Australian Macquarie bank would lead to an even more aggressive pursuit of profit than that undertaken by its previous owners, RWE.

In March, Macquarie sold its last stake in TW, having extracted £1.16 billion in dividends between 2006 and 2015, paid virtually no corporation tax and loaded the company with debt—up from £3.6 billion in 2007 to £10.2 billion. The pension scheme is around £260 million in deficit.



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