

Three die in Honolulu high-rise without sprinkler system

Andre Damon
17 July 2017

On Friday, exactly one month since the Grenfell Tower fire in London that led to the deaths of at least 80 residents, three people died in another high-rise blaze that could have been prevented with the installation of an elementary safety measure: an anti-fire sprinkler system.

The latest disaster makes clear that the London fire was not an aberration. All over the world, the lives of working people are treated as expendable in the pursuit of wealth and profits by the financial elite.

Friday's fire in Honolulu, Hawaii broke out on the 26th floor of the 35-story Marco Polo condominium building, killing Britt Reller, 54, an in-flight manager for Hawaiian Airlines, and his 85-year-old mother, Melba Jeannine Dilley, as well as 71-year-old Joanna Kuwata.

In addition to the lack of sprinklers, several building residents told the Associated Press that they did not hear or see fire alarms, raising the possibility that the fire alarm system was defective.

"Without a doubt, if there were sprinklers in this apartment, the fire would be contained to the unit of origin," Honolulu Fire Chief Manuel Neves said.

Sprinkler systems are universally recognized as a highly effective method for quickly and automatically suppressing fires and saving the lives of both residents and firefighters. "A single fire death in a sprinklered building is an extremely rare occurrence anywhere in the world... A multiple death is almost unheard of," said Ronnie King, the former fire chief of Mid and West Wales, UK.

In buildings completely protected by fire sprinkler systems, over 96 percent of fires are controlled by the fire sprinklers alone, while fire sprinklers have been found to reduce overall fire damage by 97 percent.

Yet the United States has no national code mandating

the installation of fire sprinklers in buildings and homes. Only California, Maryland and Washington D.C. require the installation of fire sprinklers in new homes.

While Honolulu has required all new high-rise buildings to include sprinklers starting in 1975, the Marco Polo condominium building was constructed four years earlier, and local laws do not require existing high-rises be fitted with them.

A study commissioned in 2005 by the Honolulu City Council found that installation of fire sprinklers in the building would have cost about \$4,305 per unit, or less than one percent of the average price of a condo.

Firefighters and their associations, including the National Fire Protection Organization, have for decades fought for laws requiring the adoption of sprinkler systems. But construction companies have lobbied furiously against these measures. Organizations such as the National Association of Home Builders spend millions each year in political donations and lobbying to relax building codes, including codes mandating the use of fire safety devices such as sprinklers.

In the UK, 99 percent of public housing estates are, like Grenfell Tower, unequipped with fire sprinklers.

Meanwhile, the victims of the Grenfell Fire have been treated with conspicuous callousness and indifference. One month after the blaze, only four of the families evacuated from the tower have been given permanent accommodations, according to the Grenfell Response Team. The vast majority have been offered accommodations that are either temporary, unaffordable, or otherwise untenable. Most residents continue to be stuck in motels or shelters.

Officials were warned repeatedly by residents and experts that the building's shoddy, low-cost cladding material, combined with other numerous fire safety

violations created a disaster waiting to happen.

Despite the obvious criminal negligence involved in the Grenfell Fire, investigators have issued no search warrants and have not interviewed anyone as a suspect, much less filed criminal charges.

Anger erupted at a public meeting Wednesday, in which Metropolitan police officials explained that investigations would be dragged out over years, with residents and survivors demanding that those responsible be prosecuted. “They knew categorically that [the cladding] would burn so rapidly. You can identify that person like that, that person needs to be arrested,” declared one resident.

Another resident told the British press outside the meeting, “There is no connection between the upper class and working class whatsoever, and that divide is getting bigger and bigger, and in Kensington and Chelsea [where the fire took place] it’s the biggest divide you’ll ever see.”

Since the disaster, numerous press accounts have detailed the correlation between poverty and fire deaths. Citing a recent study of child injuries in the UK, the *Guardian* reported that “children whose parents were long-term unemployed were a staggering 26 times more likely to die of fire-related injuries than children whose parents were in higher managerial and professional occupations.”

The treatment of the survivors of the Grenfell Fire, and with the official protection of those responsible for the disaster, is an expression of the fact that the tragedy is an integral part of a systematic policy of subordinating all social needs to the profit interests of real estate speculators and the ruling class as a whole. If working people must die to swell the bottom line of the financial oligarchy, so be it.

Safe, quality housing is a basic social right that must be guaranteed to everyone. The technology and resources exist to prevent tragedies like the Grenfell Tower inferno and the fire in Honolulu. Yet the use of these resources to meet the most basic social needs comes everywhere into conflict with the domination of a money-mad corporate and financial elite, which insists that society must be organized to meet *its* interests, not the interests of the vast majority of the population.

From the plans to slash Medicaid in the United States, to the draconian cuts to social spending by the

government of the UK’s Theresa May, to the moves by the Emmanuel Macron government in France to use the state of emergency to push through pay cuts and speedups, the policy of social counterrevolution is being pursued by the ruling classes all over the world.

If workers are to defend their social rights, and ultimately their lives, they must be mobilized and organized on the basis of an international program in the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact