

Labour shadow chancellor says Grenfell Tower fire is “social murder”: What is he going to do about it?

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Speaking on the BBC’s Andrew Marr show Sunday, Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell said that those responsible for “social murder” at Grenfell Tower should be held accountable for their actions.

McDonnell was asked by Marr whether he stood by earlier remarks made at the Glastonbury Festival’s Left Field tent debate, when he said that the victims of the June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno had been “murdered by political decisions that were taken over recent decades.”

Asked if he regretted these statements, McDonnell replied, “No, I don’t regret that... Political decisions were made which resulted in the deaths of these people.”

Later he continued, “There’s a long history in this country of the concept of social murder where decisions are made with no regard to consequences of that, and as a result of that people have suffered.

“That’s what’s happened here, and I’m angry... I believe social murder has occurred in this instance and I believe people should be accountable.”

McDonnell did not say so, but he was citing Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). Engels wrote condemning the British ruling class for the impact of fetid water supplies, cramped housing and disease on the working class:

“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.”

When asked to explain who the murderers were, McDonnell replied, “I think there’s been a consequence of political decisions over years that have not addressed the housing crisis that we’ve had, that have cut back on local government so proper inspections have not been made, 11,000 firefighter jobs have been cut as well—even the investment in aerial ladders, and things like that in our country.”

Asked directly if those responsible for the cuts were murderers, he added, “I believe politicians have to be held to account. I remain angry at how many people have lost their lives as a result of political decisions made over years.”

McDonnell was subjected to denunciations from the Conservatives, while various Labour MPs dissociated themselves from his comments.

Chancellor Philip Hammond told Marr, “It is a disgraceful suggestion in line with many other things John McDonnell has said over the years. There is not a shred of evidence to support that.”

Former Tory party leader Iain Duncan Smith told the *Sun*, “It’s quite appalling really that he goes on doing this,” before asserting that it was part of a plot by the supporters of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and McDonnell, who are “looking for revolution.”

For Labour, Emma Dent Coad, the newly elected Kensington MP, where Grenfell Tower is located, said McDonnell’s accusation of social murder is “not a view I share.”

Blairite darling Jess Phillips said, “Politicians should

pick their words carefully and you can be passionate without the potential to incite... I think we should be very, very careful about the things that we say and I have watched people, their expectations being raised up by politicians and wrongly so.”

The combined message from Phillips and Duncan Smith is: “Be careful, don’t raise public expectations of justice delivered that will not be met, as this raises the spectre of revolution.”

Everything McDonnell says is true. Grenfell’s dead are the victims of social murder and those guilty are the politicians whose decisions turned the tower block and hundreds of others nationally into death traps.

But McDonnell should be judged by his actions, not just his words.

Having said that the guilty should be punished, workers should demand to know what he is doing about it.

McDonnell, Corbyn and any politician who presumes to speak on behalf of the working class has the responsibility to name the guilty and fight nationally and within parliament for them to be brought to justice.

Among those whose political decisions led to the Grenfell inferno are the leadership of the Conservative Party, past and present, and of the Labour Party too—all those who have jointly presided over endless privatisations and savage social cuts that have continued unabated since 1979. The culpable include Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Theresa May and her likely successors, such as former Mayor of London Boris Johnson, who laid waste to London’s fire service.

These are the forces responsible for eliminating essential health and safety legislation and destroying the jobs of not just firefighters, but of 1 million public sector workers since 2010—who turned Britain into a playground for the super-rich while workers were left in death traps. But instead of demanding these figures and those most directly involved in the Grenfell tragedy in the Kensington and Chelsea Council are brought to account, McDonnell and Corbyn are instead lending crucial support to the fraudulent public inquiry convened by May.

The consultation document for the inquiry clearly states that it “will not itself result in any criminal prosecutions” and is intended solely “to provide facts and recommendations to Government and other

authorities.” For their part, the Metropolitan Police have not even questioned anyone under caution, let alone made an arrest in connection with Grenfell.

However, all Corbyn has said in response is that the inquiry should have an “ethnically diverse panel,” advising judge Sir Martin Moore-Bick! Addressing the “series of systemic failures that may extend from local to national government and beyond” should then be done in a “longer-term, more wide-ranging inquiry” that would supposedly “help to both build trust and deliver justice.”

No confidence should be placed in either May’s rotten whitewash of an inquiry, or in Labour’s attempt to make it more palatable. The Grenfell fire is a crime of capitalism against the working class. It must be answered with the development of a political movement of the working class independent of all the political defenders of the profit system.

The demand must ring out that all those guilty of social murder at Grenfell in both political and business circles are arrested, charged and put on trial.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for this to be linked to a broader socialist programme of demands to meet the essential needs of working people for safe and secure housing, decent jobs, education and health care—that will involve the immediate requisitioning of empty accommodation in London to properly house those made homeless and the reversing of all cuts to the fire brigade and other vital services.

Hundreds of billions of pounds must be allocated to strip the cladding from tower blocks, install sprinkler systems and make them safe and secure. This should be part of a massive programme of public works paid for by seizing the assets of the super-rich and taking control of the major banks and corporations.



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