

Residents in London district of Ladbroke Grove speak out on Grenfell fire

Our reporters
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A Socialist Equality Party campaign team spoke to local residents in London's Ladbroke Grove on Saturday. The team were campaigning for the public meeting being held by the SEP on August 19: The Grenfell Fire—Social Murder: A crime against the working class.

The team met with a warm response, with many residents in the working class area expressing agreement with the SEP's analysis of the fire as a crime of capitalism. The inferno was the end result of decades of deregulation and cuts by central and local governments of all political stripes, including the deadly impact of gutting the fire service. Many people expressed their interest in attending the public meeting.

Francesca and her friend Antony spoke to the WSW. She said, "There was blanket 24/7 coverage for a week or 10 days after it [the fire] happened, and you could see quite clearly people's frustrations, and what they were asking the government to do. They wanted some place to stay, some stability, information about their loved ones, and where they could live. And it's just really disheartening now to find that actually the government hasn't helped these people. There isn't support for people who are immigrants, and need help with translation and legal fees.

"The bare minimum that you would expect our government to provide for people is somewhere to live, somewhere permanent, some answers. It's really shocking the kind of basic level of help that isn't there. It doesn't exist and it doesn't seem to be forthcoming.

"I don't think poor and immigrants matter to this government. I think if this had happened to some multi-million-pound building in a different part of the borough, help would have been forthcoming instantly. But I don't think the people that run this country see people like this as having value or being worth helping.

"There are a lot of people that care, but there are also a lot of people that see people that aren't white as being deserving of less help; that they shouldn't have been given the homes in the first place, that they're taking homes from people that were born here."

A WSW. reporter pointed out that promoted around Grenfell, focussing attention on the fact that ethnic minorities were living in the building, obscures the class nature of the ongoing social attack on the poor.

Francesca replied, "But I think you can't separate the two. Race and class issues are absolutely hand in hand, and inextricably linked. So I don't think there would be in this country, for example, a multi-million-pound building with wealthy Muslim immigrants."

At that point Antony broke in to say, "Well no, I think there would be, and could even be in the same borough actually. Maybe not a tower, say a block of townhomes, but absolutely."

Francesca continued, "And when there was talk about 'rehoming' people in a nicer area there was sympathy but only up to a point, and [wealthy] people in the nicer areas said, 'I've worked hard to live here, why should they be placed here for free?'"

Jane said she opposed austerity measures that had led to the slashing of budgets by local authorities, with many vital public services, including fire safety programmes, eviscerated. "I grew up near Latimer Road," she said, "and my parents have friends who died in that fire, and I think it is completely irresponsible in one of the richest boroughs in London for austerity to do this to the people that the government should be protecting the most. It's completely out of order.

Asked what she thought caused the fire, Jane said, "I think there is a general climate of austerity and then those at the top ignored all the complaints of the residents for years. It has all come together.

"If they had just put boxes around the [exposed] gas pipes, put sprinklers in, changed the cladding, it could have saved hundreds of people's lives. I think that it has taken this, in which over 100 people have lost their lives, to see that ignoring people and their basic rights has gone too far. The treatment of the [Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC)] council towards its residents is disgusting and irresponsible.

“The council is trying to get rid of people and send them all out of London. It will be getting rid of what London is. These working class communities have always been here. There has to be more attention paid to people who need it most.

“The worst part of all this is that they [the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)] who ran the block on behalf of the council got all these warnings. They got a warning last November saying, ‘We now think it will take a tragedy before you will listen to us.’ That’s the worst part, that they saw this coming and they did nothing to stop it. There are whole families gone, children, wives, husbands gone and people whose entire lives have been ruined.”

Manual, who is a building worker and regularly meets with architects, said, “I have some knowledge of how buildings are developed. There has to be a special department in the council who signs for these kinds of changes [to cladding] and there is also some responsibility for this fire in the architects’ team.

Asked why he thought no one had been arrested or charged, Manuel said, “This has always been the same when such things happen, not just here but in other countries too. Those who did this will never take responsibility for anything.”

Manual said he agreed with the Socialist Equality Party that the callous indifference to basic fire safety that led to the Grenfell fire was central to the ruling elite’s policy to socially cleanse London of its working class population. “You have these rich people paying £2 million for a house and they don’t want to look at poor people living in a tower block near them,” he said. “I have been living around here in Ladbroke Grove for 30 years and it is so different to how it was.”

Jasmin, a single mother and council resident, said, “It’s the responsibility of the government of course to take care of the people affected. It is outrageous that the building was made unsafe with the cladding. And now some, a few, of the people were given nice flats, I think so that they will not complain. Oh, some were very good, but please—people died!

“I’m a single mum, and I have two kids and I have to move every year or two. I could easily end up in a building like that.

“The government covered up what’s happened. How many people were killed? And kids!

“And now, I think they are trying to make a political advantage out of the disaster.”

A council tenant, who did not want to give her name so as to avoid any reprisal from the RBKC, spoke out against the authorities’ underplaying of the number of people who died

in the Grenfell inferno, and the hazardous conditions in the tower block she lived in.

“I have friends [who lived in the tower] I haven’t seen, from Sudan, from Egypt, from Morocco. I think too many people have passed away. It’s [the number of fatalities] not like what they have said. And they do not care.”

She described a fire hazard in her building regarding a propane gas tank, “We speak to the council, they say, ‘Ah, sorry. It is a problem.’ But it has been there for a month, and they do nothing. They don’t come and they don’t do anything. It’s still there.

“All the people [who are indifferent to residents living in unsafe housing] who are working in the council, give them the sack straight away. This is a dirty game, OK. I have only a one-bedroom flat, but I don’t want to move into a high-rise building. It’s finished now, I’m not trusting anyone. They send people to lead the council that don’t have any experience or education, these are the people working for the building, and why?”

Asked what he thought about the official response to the fire, Jephte, a local resident, said, “It’s not serious. The people that made decisions on cladding should bear some responsibility. If you’re doing construction and you know [the cladding] can catch on fire, you should accept some responsibility.”

On the ongoing project of expelling the working class from the neighbourhood, he said, “You can’t have a place with only rich people. Who’s going to work? In this modern society you can’t have that.”

Many residents said they saw the news that the police were looking at possible corporate manslaughter charges against the RBKC and KCTMO. Mary said, “Corporate manslaughter is a just a means to make sure that no one goes to prison. They will just pay a fine and then it’s business as usual. This has to be stopped.” She added, “If you look all over London, all you see is social cleansing. Why the hell should working class people who have lived here for generations have to get out? None of this is fair and it’s wrong.”



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