

Grenfell fire: “It’s like Victorian days, where we have nothing and they have everything”

Our reporters
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A Socialist Equality Party team has been campaigning in Ladbroke Grove, ahead of the August 19 public meeting, Grenfell Fire—Social Murder: A crime against the working class.

Mary, a local resident told WSWs reporters, “I know a whole family who died in the fire. I lost one whole family and two friends. My son lost friends of his. It’s really hard.

“In 2009 and 2014, that building [Grenfell Tower] was condemned, but they just put a plaster over it. Why would anybody want gas pipes put in corridors and staircases [carried out by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) during the 2016 refurbishment]? It was cheaper than putting them in the flats and doing the job properly.

“We have to pay for that, it is social cleansing. The sooner they push us out, then they get their own way. We can’t fight back because we haven’t got the money, the power, the education that they have. They’ll always win because they’ll use the big words, they’ll use the courts. How can we fight? Who have we got behind us? Until this tragedy we had nothing, we weren’t heard.”

Regarding whom she held responsible for the fire, Mary said, “I am not sticking up for the people that put the cladding on—they need to be punished and put through court. Because everybody is making cutbacks and that company probably thought, ‘OK, we are going to put this cladding on, but maybe we can cut back.’ The people who own that cladding firm are responsible. They killed the people, as well as the council who put gas pipes on the stairwells. I was in Grenfell before and after it was reorganised. The money spent wasn’t worth it. It was still an ugly death trap.”

Describing the social cleansing of working class tenants in the area she lives, Mary said, “As far as

Longsdale Road now and closer, Avondale Park Road, it’s all going private. Even the section where I live, they are closing it down. It all used to be social housing, but it’s all being sold off. My children can’t afford to buy in London. They can’t afford to buy a house where they grew up. My daughter can’t afford to have a child. She’s thinking 10 years ahead, but to live in London and have a child is impossible. I’ve lived in London all my life and I didn’t expect this.”

Pointing to the nearby library building, Mary described how years of austerity cuts were taking their toll:

“Two private schools opened up on Lancaster Road and bought the library. The library has been moved to a little block on the corner. They greased someone’s palm and moved in there while our library is going across the road to a little shared building. They cut the ambulance and the fire brigade, and they now come from miles away—Soho, Bromley—to tackle a fire on our own patch because there is no fire station here. The firemen are not paid half of what they are worth. The job they do, the physical and mental side of it. And what do they get? Cutbacks.

“I work for the National Health Service and have done two years of voluntary work on the palliative care unit. The cutbacks are disgusting, and this was even before Brexit. It’s the same in education.

“Things will never be the same again. Once they push the working class people out, or ‘social housing people’ as they want to call us, this area will be a lot of private housing, tea bars and cafes.

“If you make somewhere look nicer, people want to move here even more. The reason they leave buildings dilapidated is to make us move out. Because the block is old and horrible looking, they automatically link the people that live there with the building.

“You have to start putting money into hospitals, mental health. It’s like Victorian days where we have nothing and they have everything.”

Adam was asked what he thought of the Grenfell fire. He said, “If I worked at the council, I could not have a clean conscience knowing I had people’s blood on my hands. I would have to leave that job and face the consequences—go to prison or whatever. Basically, it’s people’s lives, you can’t gamble with people’s lives.”

Asked what he thought about the companies that authorised and profited from flammable cladding being placed on the exterior of Grenfell Tower, he said, “In my eyes they are just as guilty as the council. If you’re building something that is for the good of the people, if you know you are putting people at risk, why do that?”

“There are all these other blocks of flats that have come to light with the same cladding. Why does it take an atrocity or something major to happen for people to pay attention? We’re in a first world country in the twenty-first century! Then there are all the other things that were wrong in the tower—no sprinklers, no fire alarm, the ‘stay in your flat’ advice. If the fire is below, you’re trapped. People jumped out of the windows because they had no choice. If you can’t get downstairs, what are you going to do?”

Asked about the cuts to the fire service, which proved to be critical in the loss of life at Grenfell Tower, Adam replied: “Look at how far the fire service would have to come—a vital resource like the fire brigade can’t get to help people, which is their job. It is something that the Grenfell Action Group were warning about for 18 months beforehand, and not a blind bit of notice was taken. They weren’t saying this may happen. They were saying this *will* happen.”

“All the people that lost their lives, and for what? It’s all about money. And I honestly believe that as long as they get paid they don’t give a monkey’s. They have blood on their hands.”

“I believe that all those found responsible should get a custodial sentence and those that are higher up the ladder should get longer. People have lost their lives, you can’t bring back people. You can’t sweep it under the carpet.”

Our reporter pointed out that many people had died at the hands of the state in the Aberfan and Hillsborough disasters, following which a cover-up took place. Adam said, “People won’t put up with that. I don’t know

anyone personally that died, but as a community we are all affected. Every day, when you read the paper and see the posters, you are affected.”

About the police statement that around 80 people died in the fire, Adam said, “It’s higher than that; it’s got to be higher. I wouldn’t like to speculate, but because of the time of day it was [the early hours of the morning] that was when most people were in. It doesn’t take into account those that were staying with friends, sleeping on their sofas. Given that there were 600 residents living there, the figure must be higher.”

Adam was angered at the fact that last year the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council received £50 million from private developers in return for being allowed to bypass legislation requiring them to build a small percentage of social housing in their new developments.

“They are getting paid not to do something rather than to do it,” he said. “It’s a backhander, a big backhander. There’s enormous problems with housing in London and for homeless people. I’ve been on the street and homeless on and off since I was 12. It took me ages to get in somewhere, and I’ve got mental health problems. But it’s because I’m a single man with no ties to the area. There’ll be at least 10 people to replace me should I leave. Now with this tragedy that’s happened, there’ll be even less housing and the council don’t want to know.”

“If it had happened to rich people, it would have been different, but because it was the poorer people, they didn’t do anything to help them. That’s gross negligence.”



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