

UK: Salford residents speak of their safety concerns after Grenfell fire

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to tower block residents living in Salford, a city located in the northwest of England with a population of nearly 250,000, who were concerned about their safety and that of their families following the Grenfell fire.

Many tower blocks in Salford are clad in flammable material similar to that which encased Grenfell. Labour Party-run Salford City Council implemented measures, including the introduction of 24-hour-a-day fire marshals—who patrol each block and are supposed to alert residents in the event of a fire starting—and the fitting of strobe lighting to some of the blocks.

Exterior panels were removed for testing, as part of the national fire safety exercise in early July. On July 28, Salford Council announced “that the cladding and insulation system used at the nine local Pendleton Blocks has failed their latest tests.” Salford, with 29, has reported the highest number of at fire-risk tower blocks of any town or city nationwide.

Deputy Mayor and Salford’s newly appointed “fire tsar,” Councillor John Merry, tried to reassure residents, saying, “We are focussed on doing what it takes to make the buildings safe and decisive steps have been taken to progress a permanent solution.”

However, such reassurances carry little weight with residents, who are being kept in the dark and want to know what is happening—above all, if and when the cladding is going to be removed.

Jon, a resident of Thorn Court, one of the blocks which have failed the tests, told the WSWs that the council “have already done two tests, and we’re still waiting for more tests. What do they want to do, wait until another block goes up in flames?”

“They initially started taking off the cladding, then they stopped work because they said they didn’t have enough information. The tenants at Magnolia Court

have heard nothing from their landlord for a month.”

Jon opposes the statement by the London’s Metropolitan Police that they may pursue the charge of “corporate manslaughter” over Grenfell. “That means they won’t be charging anyone, so no one will be held responsible for killing 80 people,” he said. “There’ll be riots on the streets if they do what they did over Hillsborough.”

In 1989, 96 Liverpool football club supporters were crushed to death at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield due to police opening a main gate and directing them into two already dangerously overcrowded terraces. The official report into the deaths ordered by the then-Conservative government resulted in no one being charged, made to stand trial, or even disciplined. It took 27 years for the families of the victims to even have the truth uncovered, let alone secure prosecutions through the findings of the Hillsborough Independent Panel in the face of bitter hostility from successive Tory and Labour governments.

Jon said, “I can understand why people are so angry about Grenfell—they should have sacked the whole lot—the management team and the council who employed them. I’m 72 and I’ve never known any party or government to do anything for the working man.”

A “scrutiny meeting” in July to discuss fire safety was held by the council behind closed doors, with members of the public barred from attending.

The Growth and Prosperity Scrutiny Panel of Salford City Council is made up of backbench councillors, who are charged with holding officers and Cabinet members to account. These meetings have always in the past been open to the public to attend and ask questions from the floor.

Even some councillors initially experienced problems

with bringing the issue of how the council is handling fire safety before the Growth and Prosperity Scrutiny Panel, and were reportedly refused permission to discuss the subject. Following protests, councillors were finally allowed to attend, but not the public.

Yemane from Eritrea, who has lived in Spruce Court for four years, said, “Four families were lost from Eritrea [at Grenfell]. The children were crying on the phone saying they don’t want to die ... The official number who passed away is not right. This was the most expensive area in the UK and they [the authorities] didn’t do enough to save them.”

Pointing to the partially removed cladding on his own block, which has left flammable insulation exposed, Yemane said, “Anybody could start a fire, simply by throwing a lighted cigarette, so cover it or remove it!”

Alice has lived in Salford all her life. She turned down a council offer of a home in a tower block. Expressing disgust that disabled people were put in tower blocks, she said, “They need sprinklers. You need safety even if you’re from a poorer background.”

Her daughter Mandy, a teaching graduate, agreed. “There shouldn’t be a rich and poor divide. The rich are just not giving the Grenfell survivors a place to stay, and they’ve lost everything.”

Sean has lived at Briar Hill Court for five years. His tower block, owned by Sterling Properties, has not been clad. Sean said the Grenfell events highlighted the general lack of basic safety features in housing for the working class. “It looks derelict,” he said. “They don’t spend any money on maintenance. Health and Safety is terrible. On a number of occasions the paramedics have come and can’t get people down because the lifts are broken.

“When I first moved in,” said Sean, “I thought, what is my plan for getting out in the event of a fire? The public inquiry [called by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May] is a token gesture to quiet people down. It’s difficult to say who’s responsible for Grenfell, [because] it’s all over. There is so much wealth down there [Kensington].”

Residents told the WSWS they were concerned about the lack of information about what was going to be done to make their tower blocks safe, and the fact that the council were not taking any urgent steps to remedy the situation and guarantee their safety.

Commenting on the cladding crisis, finance lead

member of Salford council, Bill Hinds, said, “It’s going to cost millions and millions of pounds ... There is a worry where the money is going to come from ... We’ve got a serious problem here that will go on and on ... It’s the biggest single crisis I’ve ever known.”

This is from a member of a council that has faithfully imposed every cut demanded by successive Labour and Tory central governments.



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