

Anatomy of the Grenfell Tower fire

Speech given by Thomas Scripps at Socialist Equality Party public meeting

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We are posting here the speech given by International Youth and Students for Social Equality member Thomas Scripps at the Socialist Equality Party's August 19 public meeting in London on the Grenfell Tower fire. The report by Scripps covers the events leading up to and surrounding the tragedy.

The Grenfell Tower fire has impacted on every aspect of British life. So much so that it is possible to say that politics in this country can be divided into before and after Grenfell.

The raw statistics are terrible. At least 80 are acknowledged as dead, and in reality there are likely more. Worse still is that so many men, women and young children died in such a horrible way—woken from their sleep into a reality more awful than any nightmare.

Most important, there is the widespread understanding that the fire was not only a tragedy, but also a crime.

It was the product of decisions taken that all those involved knew were potentially life-threatening, but which were carried out anyway because there was money to be made.

The circumstances that led to Grenfell are familiar to many. If a lawyer were tasked with presenting the case for the prosecution, this would be the beginning of a trial lasting months and involving the support of a team of colleagues, specialist witnesses and, above all, the questioning under oath of the accused.

It is politically vital to establish why this one event is a crime perpetrated by capitalism, by big business and the banks, the ruling class and its politicians and the vast state machinery that they control against the working class—and to explain why we have declared Grenfell to be an act of social murder.

On Wednesday, June 14, at six minutes to one in the morning, a small fire was reported in the kitchen of a fourth-floor flat at the 24-storey tower block in North Kensington—when a fridge freezer caught fire.

Even before the firefighters directly involved were aware, the blaze had spread through the window and ignited the cladding and insulation in which the building was encased.

The fire galloped up the side of the building and ended up engulfing it.

We produced a brief video explaining some of the reasons why, which I would like to show you now.

Let me break these issues down, beginning with how and why Grenfell was turned into a death-trap by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council and the “arms-length” agency they set up to administer their social housing stock.

In 1996, the entire council housing stock was transferred to the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—around 10,000 properties.

The KCTMO is called an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), which means that its profits are not taxed. This makes it very lucrative for all concerned. According to Channel Four:

- KCTMO takes in £58 million of its income from social housing, of

which:

- £14.5 million goes to management fees—a staggering £1,536 per house;

- £13 million to interest payments;
- Just £19 million goes on maintenance.

The management fee divides up as:

- £10.8 million for the KCTMO and £3.7 million for the council for managing its own TMO.

Many residents and the Grenfell Action Group had long complained of safety dangers in the aging block—including unexplained electricity surges that could have been responsible for the initial fire, and that in 2013 fire safety equipment, including fire extinguishers, had not been tested for 12 months!

There was, as we know, no sprinkler system, no central fire alarm system and just one stairwell.

The KCTMO board includes Labour councillor Judith Blakeman, who sits on the council's Housing and Property scrutiny committee, in which capacity in December 2015 she dismissed calls by the Grenfell Action Group to investigate the KCTMO.

The plan first mooted for Grenfell Tower in 2009 was to knock it down, as part of a gentrification of the entire area.

Urban Initiatives Studio was appointed to draw up a proposal for what is known as Notting Barns South, an 18-hectare site in North Kensington containing the Silchester estate and Lancaster West estate, where Grenfell Tower is located.

The Executive Summary explained:

- “The area suffers from housing stock in need of ongoing and expensive refurbishment, a range of social deprivation and other issues often associated with large post-war housing estates. This context means that land values are artificially depressed closer to the centre. ...”

Most property was to be replaced with:

- A “‘large proportion’ (610 units) of ‘high-end, high-value market housing...with a high percentage of private units.’ ”

- It stated, “New housing can benefit from the proximity to and overlooking of the park, and market housing is expected to realise increased values.”

As for Grenfell Tower:

- “We considered that the appearance of this building and the way in which it meets the ground *blights* much of the area east of Latimer Road Station. ... On balance our preferred approach is to assume demolition.”

Later in the same document:

- “With the removal of Grenfell Tower the spire of the Methodist Church on Kingsdown Close becomes again the tallest structure in Notting Barns South area east of the railway line.”

This plan was not put in place because the council got cold feet in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. So instead, they decided to do a cosmetic refurb on Grenfell, known as the “Early Value Option.” The aim

was to clad the building and put in new windows to make it prettier to look at, rather than remedy the building's many faults.

The 2014 planning application states:

- “The materials proposed will provide the building with a fresh *appearance* that will not be harmful to the area or views around it.”

- The then-council leader, Nicholas Paget-Brown, later commented: “It is remarkable to see first-hand how the cladding has lifted the external *appearance* of the tower.”

Flammable cladding was chosen, after the council rejected a 2012 bid of £11.3 million, on a contract eventually won by Rydon with a bid of just £8.7 million. To win even required Rydon cutting £693,000 from its own initial proposal.

In 2015, Harley Curtain Wall won the £2.6 million contract from Rydon to install the Reynobond PE panels. Expenditure was reduced by £300,000 by replacing zinc panels with a fire-retardant core with cheaper, combustible aluminium panels. Plans to duct panels and install ventilation grills for gas risers were also dropped, leaving dozens of gas pipes exposed to save £60,000.

A layer of thermal insulation was installed under the cladding, manufactured by Saint Gobain UK. When it burns, it gives off vast quantities of hydrogen cyanide—which killed many people at Grenfell.

Harley Curtain Wall went into administration in 2016, owing £2.5 million in taxes. Managing Director Ray Bailey was allowed to buy up the business for just £24,900 and now trades as Harley Facades.

This is how things stood on the night of June 14. The building was a death trap.

The flammable material surrounding Grenfell has been compared to wrapping 50 tons of plywood around a central core. Or, as one architect told the group Architects for Social Housing: “You might as well clad the building in 10-pound notes dipped in napalm.”

The second major feature of Grenfell is how the ability of firefighters, who performed with true heroism that night, rescuing 68 people, was impeded in this task by the decisions taken by the council and the central government cuts imposed on the fire service.

Kensington and Chelsea Council was warned as early as 2010 that building a new secondary school at the base of Grenfell Tower could block emergency vehicles' access.

A Grenfell Action Group blog post from January 2013 warned regarding the southern side of the tower:

- “There is barely adequate room to manoeuvre for fire engines responding to emergency calls, and any obstruction of this emergency access zone could have lethal consequences in the event of a serious fire or similar emergency in Grenfell Tower or the adjacent blocks.”

In November 2016, just months before the fire, the same group warned:

- “It is a truly terrifying thought, but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.”

The London Fire Brigade, under-resourced and undermanned after years of savage cuts, was disastrously unprepared for the June 14 fire.

Two fire engines were dispatched from North Kensington fire station at 12:59 and were on the scene in four minutes. In the end, some 200 firefighters and officers attended the call-out, with 40 fire engines.

But the equipment available proved woefully inadequate.

The water jet from the hose initially trained on the outside fire barely reached the fourth floor, so that Thames Water had to be asked to increase pressure. One whistle-blower told the WSWS this was the result of a deliberate policy pursued over the last 15 years to reduce water pressure in order to cut down leakage from water mains.

Even with increased pressure, the firefighters lacked the equipment they needed.

A 30-metre aerial tower, which could reach the 10th floor, only arrived half an hour after the fire had spread much higher.

A 67-metre-high tower only came several hours later from Surrey, as the London Fire Brigade does not have one.

Radio communications did not function properly or at all beyond 10 storeys. Firefighters did not have enough “extended duration” breathing apparatus, so that they could not get past the 15th floor.

These are the issues raised most immediately by Grenfell:

- The huge social gap between the lives of the rich and the poor, whose lives are considered worthless;

- Property speculation, the destruction of public housing and other vital social infrastructure coupled with, in London in particular, the social cleansing of the poor.

They all point to the broader social context in which the tragedy occurred.

Let us begin with London and then move outwards.

Britain's capital is the most socially polarised city in the UK. Yes, there are areas that are poorer and where cuts have been more savage. But nowhere is the gulf between the lives of the super-rich and millions of ordinary working people so vast and so visible.

Kensington and Chelsea Council was so keen to destroy social housing and to give Grenfell a cosmetic facelift because it stands to make millions by doing so.

It is Britain's richest borough, with the highest house prices in London—an average of £1.37 million last year—and is the site of the most expensive street in the country, Victoria Road, with an average house price £8 million.

London is the world centre of speculation and financial parasitism, including its property market. Fully 60 percent of its skyscrapers and vast numbers of luxury houses and flats are owned by overseas companies or wealthy residents, who rarely or never set foot in them. Indeed, there are 20,000 “ghost homes,” worth multiple millions, which have never been occupied.

In contrast, there are a quarter of a million households on council housing waiting lists in London and another quarter of a million, with 320,000 children, in overcrowded accommodation.

Let us look at London's most expensive residence, One Hyde Park, located in Knightsbridge, in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

It is the site of the most expensive apartment in the world, one of 86, which was sold for £140 million.

Another two of the world's top 10 most valuable properties are both in Kensington Palace Gardens—the residences of billionaire oligarchs Lakshmi Mittal and Roman Abramovich, whose neighbours are Prince William and his “radiant” wife, Kate.

Kensington and Chelsea Council are in a position therefore to make a killing.

The council raised £4.5 million from the sale of just two three-bedroom homes in the southern part of the borough.

The council struck deals worth almost £50 million with property developers to allow them to avoid the legal requirement to build “affordable accommodation” in their plush projects. In just one case, £12.1 million exchanged hands.

None of this money was used to help provide affordable homes elsewhere in the borough, or to improve existing stock. Instead, the council built up “usable reserves” of over £280 million.

The council eventually backed off from demolishing Grenfell Tower, but this is the exception, not the rule.

In July 2015, the Grenfell Action Group drew attention to a council decision to allocate £10 million for temporary accommodation “in London, the M25 area [outer London ring road] and southern counties” in a social cleansing initiative.

By spring 2016, the council had moved 1,668 homeless households into temporary housing outside the borough—the joint highest figure in England alongside Labour-run Newham Council.

Just 336 affordable units have been built in Kensington and Chelsea since 2011. There are 1,857 vacant dwellings, while the number of homeless has doubled in five years.

To be clear, the Tories have no monopoly on social cleansing. Far from it.

There are at least 214 “regeneration” schemes underway in London that will result in a net loss of 7,326 social rented homes. And Labour councils are in some ways the worst culprits—most notably in Newham, Lambeth and Haringey. While this sordid spree of speculation and looting has taken place, the essential services on which millions depend have been gutted. The Fire Brigade is only one example.

In 2012, then-London mayor and now Tory Foreign Minister Boris Johnson proposed cuts of £65 million, a 15 percent reduction in the London Fire Brigade’s £448 million annual budget. Ten fire stations were closed with 600 jobs lost. Three years later, he axed a further 13 engines, meaning an overall reduction of a quarter of the capital’s engines.

The empty stations were maintained at the cost of £1.5 million before 8 of the 10 were sold for luxury dwellings for £55 million.

There is blood on his hands.

Grenfell has taken on the dimensions of a national disaster.

- Hundreds of council blocks were similarly clad, including the Chalcots Estate in Labour-run Camden.

- Now the government has admitted that at least another 80 buildings have failed fire safety tests that are not clad in the same material—because all manner of cladding and insulation combinations are dangerous.

The list can be extended to cover thousands of schools, student residences and hospitals.

In addition, there are reports of fires involving cladding in the Middle East, Australia and elsewhere—pointing to the international dimensions of Grenfell.

Indeed, Grenfell was anticipated by blazes involving cladding in at least 20 major high-rises all over the world.

One final point must be made. By all reckoning, the authorities should be on their best behaviour! After all, the eyes of the world are on them. Millions are horrified at what was done, and many face possible criminal charges.

Yet even now Grenfell survivors are being treated appallingly. Left in hotel rooms, they are not even offered decent accommodation. And even the charities that have collected around £19 million from the public have distributed less than £3 million!

What this proves is that nothing will be given to the working class based on moral appeals to the powers-that-be. Everything depends on our striking out in a new political direction, that of socialism—which means the independent mobilisation of the working class to take over the running of society in its own interests and not those of the super-rich.



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