

The political implications of the Grenfell Tower fire

Chris Marsden
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Below is the speech given by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden at its August 19 public meeting in London on the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Grenfell fire points to a common experience of the working class all over the world.

In country after country, the super-rich get ever richer, while working people suffer an ever steeper decline in their living conditions. Just as Karl Marx insisted in his depiction of capitalism:

“Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole...”

You will know from bitter personal experience that what Marx said is true. But let me cite some recent examples of how tragedy and suffering is inflicted as a result of capitalism’s drive for profit.

Our comrades in Sri Lanka are organising an inquiry into the April 14 collapse of the Meethotamulla garbage dump in Colombo, which officially claimed 32 lives, with another eight missing. Residents say the real figure is much higher as the poorest victims, who were buried alive, don’t appear in official records. Around 146 houses have been damaged, affecting 198 families or 1,000 people.

On June 24, in Pakistan, over 200 men, women and at least 20 children were killed when an overturned petrol tanker exploded on a road in the Bahawalpur district of the southern Punjab—killing poor villagers seeking to scoop up the spilled fuel with buckets and bottles.

Last week, at least 85 children died at Baba Raghav Das Medical College Hospital in Southern India. At least 30 newborn infants died because a company turned off oxygen supplies after the hospital had missed payments on a measly £70,000 bill.

Four hundred are confirmed dead, including over 100 children, after a mudslide in Sierra Leone swept down from Sugar Loaf mountain August 14 onto shanty dwellings in the outskirts of the capital, Freetown. Another 600 are still missing, making up entire communities.

Finally, in the richest country in the world, our American comrades have campaigned for years to expose how in Flint, Michigan, Rick Snyder, a multimillionaire Republican governor, and his Democratic state treasurer, Andy Dillon, switched the city’s water supply to untreated water from the polluted Flint River.

The poisoned water has already resulted in the deaths of at least 12 residents from Legionnaires’ disease, ill health for adults and lifelong learning disabilities for the city’s children.

This is a video we produced:

The Socialist Equality Party has called Grenfell an act of social murder. It is a term coined by Frederick Engels in his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

This is what he wrote back in 1845:

“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.”

This was written at the very beginnings of industrial capitalism. Yet no one today could describe Grenfell in better terms.

It is close to four decades since Margaret Thatcher declared, “There is no such thing as society,” hailed the glories of the “free market” and promised to “roll back the frontiers of socialism.”

She left office just before the Stalinist bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union, which convinced Thatcher’s secret admirers in the Labour Party—led by Tony Blair—to build what she herself called her “greatest achievement”, New Labour.

Thatcher, Blair and their successors, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May are all guilty of social murder. Their governments are all responsible for turning Britain into a playground for the super-rich while workers are left in dire straits.

The scale of criminality is vast.

For example, in 2009, under Labour, parliament was warned of the potential risks of fire spreading via external cladding systems and, after the deaths of six people in Lakanal House in Camberwell, of the urgent need to install sprinkler systems.

Nothing was done. Instead, regulations were amended or withdrawn altogether in what Cameron later proclaimed as a “bonfire of the regulations!”

Only last year, the government junked the “expectation” that all new school buildings should be fitted with sprinklers—a year in which there were 1,500 fires in schools and educational premises.

This is what Cameron said in 2010:

“I will kill off safety culture ... We need to realise, collectively, that we cannot eliminate risk and that some accidents are inevitable.”

By 2015, the government was celebrating that it had cut house-building regulations by 90 percent.

The citing of Labour alongside the Tory Party points to why what Engels wrote in 1845 is once again relevant for today.

The late 19th century saw the birth of mass industrial unions, the dawn of the 20th the formation of the Labour Party.

We are the most steadfast critics of both for their pro-capitalist perspective, their opposition to socialism, their warmongering and countless betrayals of the struggles of the working class.

But for decades millions of workers looked to these organisations to protect them from the worst depredations of capitalism. And up to a point, they did that—by channelling social discontent into seeking collective bargaining agreements with the employers and parliamentary reforms administered by the capitalist state.

No longer.

Well before Blair, the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress responded to the globalisation of capitalist production organised across all national boundaries by abandoning their national reformist perspective.

Instead of defending the social gains of the past, they have worked for their destruction.

Workers and young people are now being told that this has all changed thanks to the election of Jeremy Corbyn. But Corbyn has not reversed Labour's decades-long lurch to the right. He is concealing it.

Consider his role in Grenfell.

Theresa May's promised inquiry is a fraud. Like so many before it, its aim is to conceal, not reveal what took place. It is headed by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, whose previous claim to fame was as a social cleanser who allowed Westminster Council to rehouse a single mother with five children 50 miles away in Milton Keynes.

The inquiry is to begin on September 14 and report by Easter next year. There is an attempt to whip up illusions, after May agreed that it would examine the actions of Kensington and Chelsea Council in the lead-up and aftermath of the fire. But it has the very "technical" remit that was rejected by residents from the start and will not deal with issues such as social housing policy, let alone bring any charges. Above all nothing will be done about the Conservative government, or its predecessors!

Meanwhile the police investigation has still not questioned a single person under oath, let alone made an arrest. The Metropolitan Police have said they might pursue corporate manslaughter charges against the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO).

But what this means is that no individuals responsible will be brought to justice. Fines might be paid some years from now, but, as it deals with public entities, the taxpayers will foot the bill.

Residents and survivors have threatened to boycott May's inquiry and regularly denounce the police for their inaction. But Corbyn has refused to withdraw his own support and has instead called May to "rethink" its scope and for a panel to advise the judge reflecting the ethnic diversity of the area!

Naturally, Corbyn will not say a word about the criminal, anti-working class activity of London's Labour councils, whose leaders remain undisturbed as members of his party!

Corbyn's main ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, has made left-sounding noises, calling Grenfell an act of social murder resulting from political decisions. But he goes along with Corbyn, refuses to name names or make any call for prosecutions—which he could do with impunity in parliament.

In contrast, I want to return to what Engels said on the question of what to do about capitalism:

"But this I maintain, the war of the poor against the rich now carried on in detail and indirectly will become direct and universal. It is too late for a peaceful solution. The classes are divided more and more sharply, the spirit of resistance penetrates the workers, the bitterness intensifies, the guerrilla skirmishes become concentrated in more important battles, and soon a slight impulse will suffice to set the avalanche in motion."

What could better describe the situation now confronting the working class?

When we look at the world today, can anyone seriously expect that the moral appeal for justice and reasoned behaviour advanced by Corbyn will be answered?

We live in a system in which the ruling class is engaged in a war against the population to make itself even more obscenely rich, and war internationally to secure control of vital resources such as oil and markets in goods and services.

That is why the "age of austerity" proclaimed for the working class sees billions cut from the National Health Service and the Fire Brigade, while billions are squandered on wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and

Syria—leaving behind countries destroyed and a mountain of corpses.

It is why this government pledges pocket change for the victims of Grenfell while it spends £167 billion on Trident nuclear weapons of mass destruction, and close to £7 billion on the HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales aircraft carriers as the supposed "embodiment of Britain in steel and spirit."

Savage austerity and the drive to war, which is already threatening conflict with nuclear powers such as Russia and China, is incompatible with democracy. It means repression and fascistic reaction.

That is why Donald Trump sits in the White House giving his blessing and protection to the Nazi and KKK murderers who killed a peaceful protester at Charlottesville after taking over the town under police protection and staging torchlight processions, chanting "Blood and Soil!" and "Jews will not replace us!"

After the horrors of the Second World War, the world's people demanded "Never Again!" But it is happening again. Right-wing nationalist reaction is being encouraged everywhere—here in Britain and in Europe—not just in America.

It must not be allowed to happen again.

But the warmongering Democrats in the US will not prevent it and neither will the Labour Party in the UK, whoever leads it. These are the struggles the working class—all of us, Black, White, Asian, whatever—must unite our forces to fight—against austerity, racism, fascism, militarism and war and for socialist internationalism.

Grenfell is a turning point in the political development of the working class in Britain. After decades in which not just socialism but even references to class were systematically marginalised, millions are realising that they are the life and death questions that must be made the basis of political life.

As we wrote:

"Grenfell has exposed the absurdities of politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation. In the universal reaction of sympathy and solidarity the fire has engendered and the hatred expressed towards the guilty, we see the reassertion of class as the fundamental division in society."

The betrayals by the old parties and trade unions, mass unemployment, wage cuts and social vandalism, ever escalating wars, all feed into the deep sense of anger unleashed in response to Grenfell.

But there is an answer to these betrayals, one that is found in the genuinely socialist tendency that never betrayed—the Socialist Equality Party and our world movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

This is the party of Marx and Engels, of Lenin and Trotsky—those who made the Russian revolution in 1917—one hundred years ago—and who then fought against its betrayal by Stalinism.

The SEP urges all survivors, local residents and workers everywhere to place no confidence in May's rotten whitewash of an inquiry, or in Labour's attempt to make it more palatable. They must rely on themselves alone, on their social power.

Appeals to the ruling elite for piecemeal reforms are futile. There can be no answer to the vast social catastrophe exposed by Grenfell other than a political offensive to end the domination of the super-rich and its political parties over society.

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

That includes Boris Johnson, May and her predecessors, Cameron, Gordon Brown and the arch war-criminal Tony Blair, as well as the heads of the Kensington and Chelsea Council, its TMO, Rydon and Harley Facades.

Hundreds of billions of pounds must be allocated to strip the cladding from tower blocks, install sprinkler systems and make them safe and secure as 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.

London's "Ghost homes" must be requisitioned to properly house those made homeless as part of 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.

But for that to happen means building a movement *to make it happen*, a new party of the working class. This is what the Socialist Equality Party stands for. It is time to join and build it.



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