

Grenfell fire survivors speak at Socialist Equality Party public meeting

Our reporters
25 August 2017

A number of survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire attended and spoke at the August 19 public meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) in London.

Nick Burton, who lived on the 19th floor of Grenfell Tower, described how he and his wife survived the fire.

“On that night someone knocked on my door. I opened it and there was black smoke everywhere. I couldn’t see so I shut my door.”

His friend Simon phoned warning him about the rapid spread of the fire, but Nick said it would be difficult to carry his sick wife and that the procedure was to stay in your flat while the fire was contained.

“Then there was a 3rd and 4th phone call saying, ‘Nick you need to be getting out... the tower is really on fire.’ Again, I said that my wife is sick and I’m not going to be able to get her down the stairs. He said ‘ok, but call the fire brigade.’ They said, ‘Sir just stay where you are, we know you are there and will get to you.’

“And after a little while I got our things together ready to leave. By this point I can see the fire out of my window.

“Then I was told ‘Nick you now need to get into the living room, close the door’. ‘Nick now get to the kitchen’.”

“I grabbed the passports because I thought, oh my god, if something happens they are going to have to identify us.

“The only place to go was the bathroom. My wife and I were in there for what seemed like an age, I don’t know, an hour? My friend told me we came out of the tower at 3.40am.

“So we were stuck in the bathroom. I spoke again to the fire brigade and they said, ‘Sir we know you are there we are coming to get you.’”

Firefighters arrived, Nick said, “Then the door

opened but I saw nothing at all. All I saw was a hand grab my wife and an arm came out of the smoke and grabbed me. ‘Let’s go’ they said, I have my dog here I said and they said, ‘Sorry let’s go’.”

“Out into the darkness and my lungs nearly exploded. There was only smoke and I was on the 19th floor, with 38 flights of stairs to come down. We went into the darkness towards the stairwell and I lost my wife. I was screaming ‘Where is my wife, where is my wife’? The fire officer said, ‘Don’t worry sir we’ve got her, don’t worry let’s go’

“I never saw the fire officer. I couldn’t even see my feet. But as we are getting further down the stairwell the railings are getting hotter and hotter. Then I couldn’t even touch it. I thought something has happened that has breached the stairwell. These are supposed to be our safe places. There is meant to be ventilation to suck out all the smoke. How can there be so much smoke here?”

Nick brought the meeting to a hush as he recalled his shocking realisation going down the stairs, “Now you step on something, you stumble you step on something. I thought it was a water pipe, but then I realised that’s not it. You are stepping on people.

“Finally, I came into the light and my legs had gone and my breathing was gone and we came into the light gasping for air.”

Nick had to wait for several minutes before his wife was carried out, with the clothes cut from her body. “They then took me to the local hospital. By that time I needed oxygen, but my wife was not with me. She had gone to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. I said that I want to go there. I got there and she wasn’t even there. 12 hours I had to look for my wife, not knowing if she was dead or alive.”

Nick said his wife was only recently released from

hospital.

Since the fire, Nick has met “so many amazing people”, which contrasted with the callous treatment of the survivors by the government and other authorities.

He said, “I got invited to Number 10. I met the PM [Prime Minister Theresa May] with the volunteers, etc. I got to Downing Street and one of the advisors said you are going to go in the back to meet the PM. I said no I am going in the front, man. I am not going in the back. There is nothing to hide here.

“I met the judge [of the Grenfell fire inquiry, Sir Martin] Moore-Bick before he was announced. I said you are 70 and if this happens like Hillsborough [the football stadium in Sheffield in which 96 people were crushed to death in April 1989 as a result of the actions of the police and authorities] then you are going to be 98 by the time anything happens.

“My belief is that the inquiry is a smokescreen to keep the government in power. If you look at other inquiries, they have achieved nothing. At Hillsborough, six people have been charged after 28 years. What has it achieved?

“This is my first public meeting since the fire. I have been fighting the TMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation] for 10 years. People need to know what has happened after the fire. We are getting emails that are making us bid [for housing] against our friends.

“The whole world is watching, but they [the government] are just acting like it’s business as usual. If we can’t change their minds then we will have to change them. Their mindset is that we are the undeserving poor, we should be humble and accept what we get.

“Corporate manslaughter [the charge the police are pursuing] is not right. It’s criminal negligence. They knew about it... As a group of survivors we will show persistence and hold these people to account.”

Sid-Ali Atmani escaped from the 15th floor of the inferno and is still living in a hotel with his wife, daughter and stepson. He explained, “Since the incident... we have been treated, we the residents, with contempt. The government is not giving any support to us.

“As a community we are doing everything to provide for the victims, but it is not enough. In my lifetime, I have never seen a government like this. It is totally

shameful in its manner of treating the victims. And they have been put in this situation because of the government’s negligence.”

Sid was sick for a month after the fire and had to take an assortment of medicines. He raised his arm to the audience to show a blue wristband. “My number is 031430”, he declared. “I have to write this number every time I go for care. It isn’t human.”

The council had failed to offer the survivors security of tenancy in new homes. Sid criticised the hyped media stories about survivors being offered homes in the expensive Kensington Row private apartment block, saying, “The service charge there is four times what it is in the [Grenfell] tower.” The rent there would only be paid for just one year and this was not applicable for anyone on housing benefits. “What they are trying to do here is totally disastrous.”

In the inquiry chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick “the question of social housing is not being included because they don’t want anyone to be prosecuted.

“The law has to be changed. Social housing has to be changed, because all this will not be changed by them. Martin [Moore-Bick] will not change anything.”



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