

UK: Salford residents challenge Labour Council over fire risks revealed by Grenfell Tower

Our reporters
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The Unison trade union held a public meeting in the Greater Manchester city of Salford last Tuesday titled “We demand safe secure homes.”

With 29 flats covered in highly combustible and toxic cladding, Salford has the highest number of tower blocks outside London to have failed government fire-safety tests, rolled out after the terrible fire that consumed Grenfell Tower on June 14 that left at least 80 dead. Yet, two months after the fire, the hazardous cladding is still in place.

The meeting—attended by about 50—offered no way forward for residents, of Salford or elsewhere, who are forced to live in potential death traps.

An invited speaker on behalf of Justice4Grenfell, Moyra Samuels, explained to the meeting that the “Grenfell action group predicted this fire ... they wrote about it nine months ago, and the people who wrote this were threatened, and [it] was actually inferred that they may be drunks.”

The conservative-led Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council, with reserve funds of £275 million, signed the death warrants for the victims of Grenfell Tower when they decided to make £300,000 savings on refurbishment, “choosing the cheaper type [of cladding] above the safer, more expensive, and fireproof cladding,” she explained.

Deputy Mayor of Labour Party-run Salford Council John Merry told the meeting, “I am going to the City Council to ask them to authorise the borrowing of £25 million to sort out the issues on the precinct and the tower blocks that we are responsible for.”

Salford runs nine tower blocks through Pendleton Together. Decladding work on the other 20 failed blocks in Salford, run by Salix and City West, has

stopped.

The loan would be repaid with annual interest at £1.5 million, which according to a council report quoted in the *Salford Star* will mean more cuts. The borrowing will “exacerbate existing budget pressures” and increase the “revenue funding gap in 2017/18 and future years.”

Merry was standing in for Salford Mayor Paul Dennett, a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn who has just signed off the closure of The Grange, the only residential school for disabled children in Salford—a city with a population of 233,000.

Speakers from Unison and the Fire Brigades Union on the platform, as well as Merry, put sole blame for the Grenfell fire on the Conservative council and Conservative governments. As if austerity, privatization, and the gutting of fire safety regulations were not also the hallmark of the Blair/Brown Labour governments, as well as the local Labour councils.

Unite member Glynn Robbins, a London Housing worker who stood as a candidate for the Socialist Party-fronted Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition in Bethnal Green and Bow in 2015, suggested the way forward was a turn to the forthcoming Trades Union Congress and Labour Party conferences. He claimed that the Labour Party had changed with the election of Corbyn, so “we have to acknowledge the possibility at least of a prime minister in this country who is genuinely committed to building council housing.”

In this framework, the Socialist Party urged “Salford City Council and Mayor Dennett to implement a socialist housing policy,” and called for an “independent inquiry led by tenants and trade unions.”

A speaker from the Socialist Workers Party declared,

“Jeremy Corbyn’s victory was a moment of neo-liberalism being defeated.”

Socialist Equality Party member Geoff Williams, a resident in a Salford high-rise for over 30 years, told the meeting, “The SEP has been campaigning in London on the Grenfell issue since the fire, and we held a very successful public meeting there last Saturday, well attended with a hundred people present ...

“What is glaringly obvious, though Grenfell is in the Tory borough of Kensington and Chelsea, it’s not only Tory boroughs, but Labour councils up and down the country that have been privatising social housing for decades ...

“Haringey in London has the worst record on social cleansing in the country, but Manchester and Salford are challenging that.

“The gentrification of Ordsall, in Salford, became the feature of a Channel Four news programme two weeks ago, on which counsellor Merry spoke, defending the privatisation of social housing.

“Cash strapped Salford, as a contributor to the Greater Manchester Housing fund, has made available as a loan to the billionaire bookie Fred Done £22.5 million, so he can build, not social housing, but private apartments.

“In 2015 there were 14,000 homeless people in Salford on the waiting list, and we were told that half of them could never expect to be re-housed.”

At this point the chair Ameen Hadi of Unison intervened to stop Williams speaking. They “wanted to discuss what we will do next, and not just recount history,” he said, “It was a pity you wasted your three minutes in a negative way.”

Other residents expressed their anger with Salford council. Elizabeth, who spoke to the SEP later outside the meeting, declared, “It’s blatantly class warfare, and racism, that’s what’s going on here. They believe that if you are a person of colour, if you are born working class, you don’t have a right to decent housing.

“You are supposed to just put up with your lot in life. Britain’s resources belong to everybody and forcing people to stay in blocks when they’re not happy, is wrong.”

One man climbed onto the platform and challenged Merry directly. He explained he had a fire in his flat and sued the council for faulty electrics. Six years later,

indebted to the tune of £25,000, he is still fighting his case.

Another member of the audience, in response to the chair’s repeated attempts to steer criticism away from the Labour Party, shouted out in exasperation, “You wanted anger, this is how people feel!”

At the end of the meeting, most of the local residents declined an invitation from the chair to join the platform for a photo-op holding *Fight the Tories* posters. Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party members joined the photo-op.

Elizabeth has lived in Spruce Court for two years, one of the tower blocks that is encased in highly flammable cladding. She was scathing about Salford Labour Council, saying that if you contact them “only 50 percent of complaints get a reply. We have power surges in Spruce. There’s no fire extinguishers, no fire blankets; they put a fire alarm [in the block] but we can’t hear it.

“The council said they would remove the cladding, but they started on the low-rise blocks first—10 weeks later! They’re not bothered, it’s just greed, they devalue human beings and put profit first.

“People burned alive in Grenfell. They were having to throw their kids out of the windows, and [the authorities] are blatantly lying about the numbers [who died].”

When asked about the meeting, Elizabeth said, “It was just stage managed. They talk like it was the tenants’ fault. Salford Council won’t take responsibility—it is corrupt.”

John, who has lived in Arthur Millwood Court for five years, left the meeting early in disgust. He told the SEP that the organisers “said they wanted people to be angry, but when we were openly angry they tried to shut us down. I live in the top floor of a cladded block, and our lives are in danger.”



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