

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry and the case for socialism

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The official opening of the government-convened Grenfell Tower Inquiry is an affront to the victims and survivors of the terrible inferno that swept the 24-storey tower block in west London on June 14, killing at least 80 people.

In his 45-minute statement, Chairman Sir Martin Moore-Bick spoke of remembering those who had suffered with “humility and compassion,” “dismay,” and “sadness.”

The cynicism of his remarks was made clear by his refusal to take questions from those in attendance. Just 200 places were available for those wanting to attend, and then on a “first come, first serve” basis. Moore-Bick stood immediately after he had finished speaking, turned his back on the audience and left the room, to cries of “rubbish.”

His contemptuous display is not simply that of an individual. It epitomises the same class arrogance and indifference of the powers-that-be towards working people that ensured Grenfell Tower became a death trap for so many of its residents.

Exactly three months after the fire, not a single person has been arrested, let alone cautioned. Nor has any official death toll been released. An untold number remain in hospital, while hundreds of survivors and their families have been abandoned in temporary accommodation. Some 20 people are estimated to have tried to commit suicide as a result of the trauma they suffered.

The central assertion of the inquiry—that no one could have known the dangers—is a lie. People died because their lives are considered worthless in a country where only the super-rich matter.

In the rush to “prettify” the tower block for the neighbouring super-rich residents of Chelsea and Kensington, the wealthiest borough in London, the lives and safety of its residents were recklessly endangered.

The fire, which started due to an electrical fault in a fridge in a fourth floor apartment, was able to rapidly

engulf the entire building because it had been covered in highly flammable cladding. According to experts, the Aluminium Composite Material chosen was the equivalent of dousing the tower with 32,000 litres of petrol, and then setting it alight. But it was selected because it was £293,000 cheaper than a non-combustible alternative.

Under this cladding a layer of thermal insulation was installed that, when it burns, gives off vast quantities of hydrogen cyanide—the effects from which many survivors are still suffering. The fate of those who died was sealed by the lack of basic fire safety measures, including the lack of a sprinkler system, no central fire alarm and a single stairwell.

Grenfell residents continuously warned that a “catastrophic loss of lives” was being prepared. They were not only ignored, but were threatened with legal action if they continued to complain.

As for Moore-Bick’s reference to the “unprecedented challenge” faced by the emergency services that attended that night, he presented this as if it were unrelated to the sweeping cuts imposed by central and local government in the fire service. In London alone, 10 fire stations had been closed and the jobs of 6,000 firefighters axed under then London Mayor Boris Johnson—now Foreign Secretary—who notoriously told those challenging his cuts to “get stuffed.”

So much for Moore-Bick’s claim that the inquiry “will provide answers to the pressing questions of how a disaster of this kind could occur in 21st century London” and on this basis, “provide a small measure of solace.”

The thin gruel of solace is all that is on offer. Moore-Bick said the inquiry has no power to “punish anyone or to award anyone compensation”, declaring that “section 2 of the Inquiries Act 2005 [which governs the Grenfell Inquiry] prohibits me from ruling on or determining anyone’s civil or criminal liability.”

The ultimate insult was Moore-Bick's explanation of why he had rejected submissions to appoint a local resident to act as an assessor to the inquiry. To appoint someone "who had had direct involvement in the fire *would risk undermining my impartiality in the eyes of others who are deeply involved in the Inquiry.*" [emphasis added]

What impartiality! The inquiry was set up by the Conservative government, whose policies of austerity, deregulation and privatisation provided the framework for the Grenfell catastrophe. This same government has determined the inquiry's remit and appointed Moore-Bick as its chairman. Moreover, the inquiry's leading personnel are drawn from government departments, such as its secretary, Mark Fisher, who was previously responsible for devising the workfare programme for the Department of Work and Pensions.

As to the "others who are deeply involved in the Inquiry", these are none other than the heads of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation and the cost-cutting companies they contracted, who are directly responsible for the inferno.

When Moore-Bick speaks of not favouring a "class of witnesses", what he really means is that the participation of working class witnesses must not be allowed to interfere with the cover-up that is underway. Just as the complaints of Grenfell residents were silenced, so the voices of working people continue to be excluded and suppressed.

For the ruling elite this is essential. Not only so that no one amongst their number is held accountable for their decisions and actions but to ensure the political establishment as a whole can continue with the same anti-working class policies that produced this social crime.

This was underscored by *Esquire* magazine's interview with *Evening Standard* editor, and former chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne. Attacking those who "rushed to blame the whole thing [the Grenfell fire] on Kensington and Chelsea Council saving costs," Osborne said what was involved was "a massive failure of fire standards over many, many years..."

He has a vested interest in making such claims. As chancellor in the previous Tory government, he pushed through the most draconian austerity measures undertaken since the Second World War. This went hand in glove with the gutting of safety regulations. It was David Cameron, as prime minister in the same government, who boasted he was waging a "war" aimed at "Killing off the

health and safety nonsense for good", and that people had to recognise "some accidents are inevitable."

But these policies were only a continuation of the social counterrevolution begun under Thatcher in the 1980s and deepened by the Blair Labour government. It was Blair's adviser, Peter Mandelson, who declared Labour was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich," as it facilitated the looting of public funds and resources by its backers in the financial oligarchy.

This is not just a British phenomenon. Catastrophes such as Grenfell are replicated in every country throughout the world—most recently, and graphically, in the abject failure of the US ruling class to undertake even the most basic measures to ensure public safety in the face of Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma.

Many workers and youth have no confidence in the Grenfell Inquiry. They know a whitewash is underway. What is necessary is to draw political conclusions from these events.

An entire social system, capitalism, stands indicted. The money mad and sociopathic ruling class in every country are incapable of planning anything, except the further transfer of wealth to the super-rich and the commissioning of wars that threaten humanity with nuclear Armageddon.

The freeing up of social resources to meet the needs of working people requires breaking the stranglehold of the financial aristocracy and its political representatives, and reorganising society on socialist foundations. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.



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