

Grenfell Tower fire eyewitnesses: “It’s because of our class—we are the lowest socioeconomic class on the food chain”

Our reporters
20 September 2017

Salma was an eyewitness to the Grenfell Tower fire. She knew the Wahabi family, of whom all five members perished in the inferno.

She explained to the WSWS, “I live quite close to the block and what I saw that night was a catalogue of errors. It started as a small fire and what I didn’t understand was, a month before there was a fire in [nearby] 31-storey Trellick Tower. That fire was contained.

“But here, you’re telling me a fridge on the fourth floor caused all of that? No, it didn’t. There’s no way it could have happened. That fire started small, I was outside, and I was like, ‘OK this is manageable. They’re going to come, they’re going to manage it, everyone will be all right.’ But the way it went up was like they added petrol. It just ignited and it just went all around. The cladding was combustible, it caught fire quickly and because there were air gaps that just ignited the fire even more.”

Told that an expert assessment stated that the Grenfell cladding could produce an equivalent to putting 32,000 litres of petrol in the building, Salma commented, “If they knew it was that bad why would they place it there in the beginning? It’s like putting a knife on the table in front of a toddler.”

She had known the Wahabi family all her life: “We’re Moroccan and with their parents knowing ours we just grew up together. It’s a natural thing to the point where we were friends with each other’s cousins.”

Salma explained that as Grenfell Tower burned, the police, “instead of assisting, because that’s what they’re here to do, to protect the public, instead of assisting the fire victims, the firefighters with more

resources, they were more interested in bringing in the riot vans, and bringing in more police.

“When people saw the firefighters struggling, the young men from my area who I’m very proud of, they said, ‘Give us your equipment and we’ll go in there.’ I heard them and I saw them. They were begging the firefighters, ‘Give us your equipment because you’re tired and we’ll go in.’ Ask anyone in the community and they’ll tell you. What were the police doing? Trying to arrest us.”

Asked what she thought of the fact that due to cuts, firefighters arrived at the blaze with woefully inadequate equipment, Salma said, “I think that once again everything comes down to politics. [Prime Minister] Theresa May, I don’t know why she’s still up there. They take people’s tax, but then make cuts and attack people’s safety.

“Before the cuts we had inflatable beds where you could jump from up how many metres high. You might get bruises, but you’re alive. Back then we had more oxygen tanks, we had more firefighters. They have closed fire stations too. The only thing I have seen come out of my taxes is when the police are there to arrest people.”

Asked what she thought about the vast majority of survivors remaining homeless three months after the fire, she replied, “It’s disgusting. We’re a first world country. We are the United Kingdom. We’ve conquered nearly the whole world and you’re telling me we couldn’t place people in decent accommodation?”

“It’s because of our class. We are the lowest socioeconomic class on the food chain. I feel personally that the people of Grenfell won’t give up. When the

authorities claim they will put the survivors up in these million pound mansions, of course they will say ‘no’ and not take them. Because the council are saying the rent is free for one year, but after that it’s £2,500 a month. They’re setting them up for failure again, so it doesn’t surprise me that Kensington and Chelsea Council hasn’t placed these people in accommodation, because look at the way they handled the fire.”

Salma contrasted the readiness of the ruling elite to pay for wars, while not being able to commit resources to housing a few hundred people who survived the fire. “You’re ready to charge us into war that has nothing to do with us and you wouldn’t do that [help survivors] after a fire.”

Asked what she thought of the government’s inquiry into the fire she stated, “The inquiry is only being done to keep people’s mouths shut. They don’t really care about us. It’s organised crime. Listen, this government is better than the Italian Mafia. It’s better than the cartels. They are very highly equipped. They had no choice but to do it anyway. If they stayed quiet and didn’t do an inquiry, then, yeah, we would have spoken up. It’s only to keep our mouths shut and for the rest of the world that doesn’t know what Grenfell is, what Grenfell stood for and what Grenfell stands for now.

“I’m saying the head of the KCTMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation—who managed Grenfell Tower], and the head of housing [at Kensington and Chelsea Council], because he knew or she knew that they should never have lived there, all of these whose pockets are full, should be charged. You weren’t doing your job. You’d just turn up, show your face, pocket your money and go home to your mansion.”

Rana told the WSWS, “My mother’s best friend and her daughter lived in the block. They both died in their sleep in the fire on the 18th floor. They have been identified and a few days ago the funeral went ahead.

“I live by the fire station in North Kensington and I was on the way to the airport in the morning after the fire. We saw heavy black smoke coming out at about 8:30 a.m. People were running and screaming, and there were many fire engines.

“They had the flammable cladding on the tower, but in this day and age the block should have been fire proof. Many people and children have died from the fire. They had no fire escape, no outside stairs, nothing

like that.”

Rana noticed that the firefighters initially tackled the fire with a hose that barely reached up a few floors of the tower: “I could see that the fire brigade could not reach people inside. The fire hose was not reaching up the building. No helicopters, no tall ladders, nothing.

“The authorities did not care for these people. For them it was like living in a volcano. So they had to die, there was no other way.”

Rana said she felt that many others living in tower blocks around the UK were imperilled. “When I pass by [Grenfell Tower], I cry. My mother lives in the same housing block as mine and she is afraid to sleep for fear a flat above or below will catch fire. The building has cladding but they [the local council] claim it is fire proof.

“Now, each time I ride by in a car or in a bus and see a tower block, I think, ‘That is it, they are finished.’ There is no safety, nothing.”

The Socialist Equality Party is holding the first in a series of regular meetings on the Grenfell Tower fire on September 30 at the Maxilla Hall Social Club, North Kensington, London. The first meeting will discuss the opening of the Grenfell Tower Fire inquiry and the way forward in opposing the government’s cover-up and establishing the truth about the fire and those responsible.

Meeting details:

Saturday, September 30, 2 p.m.
Maxilla Hall Social Club
2 Maxilla Walk, North Kensington
London, W10 6NQ



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wsws.org/contact