Grenfell fire families challenge government inquiry cover-up

Robert Stevens
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Survivors and families of around 50 victims of the Grenfell Tower fire have threatened to withdraw support from the government's inquiry.

They are demanding, via a petition, that Prime Minister Theresa May appoint a panel—with decision-making powers—to work alongside the judge of the inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

The petition is backed by the Grenfell United group representing many survivors and families. It calls on May to "exercise her powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 to appoint additional panel members with decision making power to sit alongside Chair in Grenfell Tower Inquiry: to ensure those affected have confidence in & are willing to fully participate in the Inquiry."

It adds, "To secure trust in an establishment we feel has been distant & unresponsive, & to avoid a collapse of confidence in the Inquiry's ability to discover the truth, it is fundamental that;

"1. The Inquiry is not led by a judge alone. Panel members must be appointed with relevant background, expertise, experience, & a real understanding of the issues facing those affected.

"2. Legal representatives of bereaved families see all evidence from the start & are allowed to question witnesses at the hearings."

The petition represents the first major independent challenge to the government's plans to carry out a cover-up of the events that led to the deaths of at least 71 people.

The inquiry is wholly controlled by the government. Moore-Bick is the only person empowered to say or do anything, but even he has no legal powers to prosecute anyone. His essential role is to report back to the prime minister with the findings and recommendations of the inquiry, with the government deciding what is done.

The BBC reported that the families want to add people to the panel who have the "breadth and experience" of the "big social issues" that led to the tragedy.

The survivors are demanding that the legal representatives of the families have access to all evidence presented from the outset, and be allowed to question witnesses at their discretion. This is in opposition to the present highly restricted remit of the inquiry, with all questions having to be submitted to Moore-Bick a week in advance. It is then Moore-Bick's decision alone whether the witnesses will even be asked these questions.

The stand taken by survivors follows the move by Moore-Bick last month to appoint three assessors to assist him. The assessors have no power to refer evidence back to the prime minister and no other decision-making powers.

All three, Joe Montgomery, Joyce Redfearn and Professor David Nethercot, are longstanding pillars of the establishment. They were chosen after Moore-Bick ruled out submissions to appoint a local resident to act as an assessor to the inquiry—on the basis that this would undermine his "impartiality"—when he opened it in September.

The petition was set up by Adel Chaoui, who lost four relatives in the fire; his cousin Farah Hamdan; her husband Omar Belkadi; and two of their daughters, eight-year-old Malak and six-month-old Leena.

Chaoui told the *Guardian* , "[I]t's hard to have faith in a process initiated by an establishment that's been distant, detached and unresponsive to our concerns and an inquiry led by a judge who is far removed from the realities of our lives. To build trust and to discover the truth, we need diverse panel members to share decision-making power with Sir Martin Moore-Bick."

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Commenting on the restrictions placed on the legal representatives of the families and local community, Chaoui said, “Not committing to giving our legal representatives the ability to question witnesses on the day is not a picture of a balanced, impartial or fair process.”

Sky News cited comments from Chaoui that the demand for an impartial panel to be set up is “not about ethnicity. It’s nothing to do with whether you’re black, white, Arab, whatever—it is to do with experiences… At the same time, we are up against these industry bodies that are spending millions of pounds on legal resources that we are never going to get anywhere near.”

Sky News reported, “Chaoui warned that unless the format is changed, he and others were unlikely to attend the inquiry, which is due to begin hearing evidence in the new year.”

Karim Mussilhy, who lost an uncle, Hesham Rahman, in the fire, said the petition “is the first time we [survivors and families] have come together to issue a statement. We want to be listened to. At the moment we feel we are being ignored again, just like before and after the fire.”

He added, “We have launched the petition because we’re losing faith in the public inquiry. We want it to give us answers and help to heal the trauma we have experienced, but at the moment our concerns are being belittled and ignored, which is causing more upset and anxiety.”

Another relative, Sandra Ruiz—who lost her 12-year-old niece, Jessica Urbano, in the fire—told the *Guardian*, “Unless the prime minister takes urgent action to increase confidence in the process, the inquiry risks perpetuating the gross sense of injustice we feel and becoming a whitewash.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) encourages the Grenfell families in their struggle to expose the undemocratic nature of the inquiry.

According to Mussilhy, May has told Grenfell families that she is now considering appointing a panel to the inquiry, after first ruling it out. However, the sort of fudge that can be expected was indicated by a government spokesman, who said, “We would like to assure all those affected by the tragedy that legal representatives of core participants will receive all relevant evidence, be able to offer opening and closing statements at hearings and will be able to suggest lines of questioning for witnesses.”

In other words, Moore-Bick will still determine which “suggestions” from core participants regarding questions are taken up, and he and no one else will have the right to pose them.

The SEP has insisted from the outset that Moore-Bick’s inquiry was intended as a whitewash. This has been the case in every other inquiry into events in which the state was responsible for a mass loss of life. The demands now placed by the survivors show that this is understood, and that they are determined to make sure that the government’s schemes are defeated and justice is served on the guilty.

The SEP established the Grenfell Fire Forum as a democratic forum for Grenfell survivors and local residents to discuss these vital issues. The next meeting of the Forum will be held on Saturday, December 9 at 2 p.m. at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington.

See the Facebook page event for more details.

Those who wish to sign the petition by the Grenfell families and survivors can do so here.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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