

Grenfell Fire forum discusses upcoming six month anniversary

Our reporter
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The Grenfell Fire Forum held at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington took place two days prior to procedural hearings beginning Monday of the official inquiry under Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

Attending were local-residents as well as workers from Camden, Westminster and other London boroughs.

World Socialist Web Site British editor Robert Stevens explained that with the six-month anniversary of the fire on December 14, the official final death toll is 71 people, and over 70 others injured.

This number is disputed but, as Stevens explained, “whether it is the Metropolitan Police’s fatality figure or a larger figure, the Socialist Equality Party has described the fire as ‘social murder.’ Grenfell residents were placed in a situation by the authorities where the terrible consequences of what could happen to them were known.”

Stevens asked, “Six months on what has happened to the survivors and their families? Out of the 208 households that needed rehousing after the fire, 118 will still be in emergency accommodation or with friends over the Christmas period. These include 29 families with children. Grenfell United, which represents the families, said a further 48 households have accepted permanent housing offers but have not yet moved in and are currently still in temporary homes. So in total 166 households will still be in temporary housing at Christmas.”

The same hostility of the ruling elite to the needs of the population that led to the fire has determined their response ever since.

Kensington and Chelsea Council—in the face of mounting public anger—said all would be housed within three weeks. Then they said it would be by Christmas and now it is by June next year. By then families who

saw their loved ones suffer and die will have been homeless for a year.

A state cover-up was mounted immediately. To this day, the police criminal investigation into the fire has not resulted in a single person being arrested, let alone charged.

The government inquiry is part of the same cover-up said Stevens, explaining that Moore-Bick has no powers to prosecute anyone. Moreover, the terms of the inquiry specifically rule out any evaluation of issues of a “social, economic and political nature.”

“We reported this week on the very important step by the Grenfell families to challenge the remit of this anti-democratic inquiry. They are demanding that Prime Minister Theresa May appoint a panel of trusted people—with decision-making powers—to work alongside Moore-Bick. They also demand that legal representatives of the families have access to all evidence presented from the outset, and be allowed to question witnesses at their discretion and on the day.”

Stevens stressed, “Everything has confirmed that class oppression and exploitation is the central issue raised by the Grenfell tragedy.

“The inferno happened in London, one of the richest cities in the world, and in London’s richest constituency. The victims burned to death because they were working class in a society in which the only people deemed to matter are the super-rich.”

“What took place was the predictable result of four decades of deregulation by successive Conservative and Labour governments and their local representatives,” he added. “The loss of life at Grenfell was a horrifying example of the devastation that capitalism has wrought on generations of working people.

“There have been countless statements by local people blaming Grenfell on the treatment of the poor

and the working class. This is recognition by many that class is the fundamental dividing line in society. It's not gender, or ethnicity or anything else, it is class."

Stevens said it is vital that workers and young people organise independently of all the main parties to fight for their interests—the right to housing, to education, to health care. Labour was just as much responsible for social cleansing as the Tories. Earlier in the week, the Labour council in the London borough of Haringey voted through the latest stage of its £2 billion privatisation programme, which involves the demolition of seven working class estates.

The vote only went through because Labour councillors who are supporters of party leader Jeremy Corbyn agreed to stay away. They would rather remain in the Labour Party than oppose a policy of social cleansing.

One of those attending the forum, Kerdesan, lives locally and witnessed the fire along with her children. Her son had pointed at the tower during the fire and said, "That's my friend's house. Are they dead in there? They're burning."

"Three years old and they are telling you that," she said. After the fire, no one from the council came to ask how she and her children were coping.

Even after Grenfell the council is still trying to move social housing residents out of the borough, telling them there are plenty of properties elsewhere. It's been "six months since the tragedy and nothing has been done" by the authorities to help the bereaved, survivors and local community: "Leading figures in the council responsible for Grenfell at the time should be arrested, including former council leader Nick Paget-Brown and the ex-head of housing, Laura Johnson."

Two residents from the Chalcots estate in Camden attended. Michelle told the meeting that one family from Grenfell has been rehoused into one of the Chalcots tower blocks, even though they were cited as being unsafe following the tragedy. The family were put into a one bedroom flat on the 16th floor "despite having lots of kids." Michelle added, "Apparently she [the mother] is terrified going into the lift. Out of all the tower blocks in the whole of London, they put them in one of those that were evacuated and still have remedial work going on."

Michelle spoke of the ongoing struggle residents have had with the Labour-run council over the unsafe tower

blocks in which they live. It was only now, months later, that flammable cladding has been removed from tower blocks on the estate. Even so, some of the towers will still have some cladding left on over Christmas.

In June, without warning, the council decided to evacuate thousands of people from the Chalcots tower blocks after advice from the fire services as they were fire hazards. The experience was traumatic, with some people screaming and crying. At least in one case, Michelle said, parents were not allowed back into the building to get their children.

Michelle's husband, Paul, explained that sealant strips on the fire doors had only been fixed up to the 8th floor and despite this the work was signed off as complete enough for people to move back in.

Through his own research, Paul said that he found out subsequently that in the case of Lakanal House fire, the lack of such strips was one of four prosecutable counts cited. If Camden Council was prosecuted over this under corporate manslaughter legislation, all that would result would be a "very large fine for the council with ordinary people ultimately footing the bill."



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