

Film Review

“Grenfell changed everything”—*Failed by the State: The Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell*

Paul Bond
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The Grenfell Tower fire exposed the realities of class oppression and social inequality in the most brutal way. For many, it has forced a growing recognition that the roots of that inequality are to be found in the capitalist system.

A new, short, three-part documentary, *Failed by the State: The Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell*, shows that growing realisation. It deserves to be watched and shared widely.

The three parts are available on YouTube, view parts One, Two and Three.

The film presents many strong and principled statements from residents and local workers, as well as comments from the council and various political figures. Its essential strength is in its attempt to understand the social murder at Grenfell Tower in terms of the devastation being wrought by global capitalism.

The film includes a clip of Prime Minister Theresa May, as part of a damage-limitation exercise, describing what took place at Grenfell as a “failure of the state.” The reasons for this failure, rooted in the enormous growth of social inequality, are detailed by the film.

Failed by the State was co-written for Redfish, a Berlin-based independent journalists’ organisation, by Daniel Renwick and presenter Ish.

Ish was born in Grenfell Tower and lived there for 25 years. As he narrates in the film’s opening scenes, he couldn’t sleep after seeing “the heart of my estate burn ... That night will follow me and my peoples for the rest of our lives.”

The most powerful aspect of *Failed by the State* is that it demonstrates how consciousness has been

radically altered in the space of weeks and months.

“Grenfell changed everything,” says Ish. “We talk politics now and how we can take power. Because we learnt that we have to look after ourselves.”

“The reality for us? The battles won’t stop,” he continues.

The film is marked by a genuine search for answers as to the wider causes of the Grenfell Tower fire. Pointing to the fact that eight individuals own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world’s population, the film notes, “Our local fight is against global enemies and structures.”

Musician Lowkey movingly describes the victims as “vindicated in death,” but still not heard.

The film refuses to use footage of the fire because “we never want to see that again.” The pre-credit sequence to Part 1 opens with the crucial role played in the fire by the use of flammable cladding on the tower. It notes the proposed restrictions on the use of such cladding and also the paltry amount a fire-retardant replacement would have cost the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC): “Instead they opted for needless austerity and it killed.”

This is the starting point for the filmmakers’ reflections, not their conclusion. Grenfell burned “for local and global reasons. There’s a bigger picture that I learn more about each day,” Ish says.

“Global capital has no regard for people like me”. This is the “same the world over from Berlin to Rio, Madrid to New York.”

Another local resident, Naf, explains, “I’m working class. I’ve never felt such a difference between—when I say us and them, I’m talking class. I don’t mean racial.”

The comments are striking and point to how the Grenfell tragedy has brought the issues of class division to the fore.

Some interviews are more revealing than others. The net is cast wide and includes not only local Labour MP Emma Dent Coad, but also Ian Bone, a political dilettante and founder of the anarchist group, Class War, who now seems to be advocating a type of municipal socialism for North Kensington.

Dent Coad was elected at the 2017 snap election in a previously solid Tory seat, as part of a general shift to the left within the working class. She speaks of the anger of many of her constituents at growing social inequality, and of the “managed decline” of social housing as a product of “warfare against people with low incomes.”

She cannot honestly address how Labour councils are as complicit as the Tories in social cleansing, as demonstrated in the London borough of Haringey, where Labour is pushing through a £2 billion privatisation programme involving the demolition of seven council estates.

Ish states, “Many of us now see a warfare by the rich in collusion with their mates in local government.” Of the role of RBKC, he declares, “They didn’t represent us, they lied, they cut, they deregulated and it killed.”

Many of the interviewees discuss the question of gentrification in one of the most socially polarised areas in the country. Deepening inequality is forcing the poorest out of the area, and there is a growing feeling that the continued presence of the poor in social housing is seen as an obstacle to what Lowkey describes as a property “goldmine.”

Ish speaks of the relentless property development projects throughout the city. “The deadly consequences we suffered make the cranes loom on the horizon in different, more threatening ways now.”

The film cites the involvement of local Conservative politicians in various property and redevelopment companies and projects, enriching themselves while the local working class is stripped of all resources.

Ed Daffarn, a Grenfell Tower resident, who was a member of the Grenfell Action Group and long-time critic of RBKC’s erosion of basic safety standards, points to the destruction of local social provisions. The council should have been keeping us safe, he tells Ish, but they were busy plundering assets, including the

area’s 125-year-old library building.

The film captures the developing mood that justice cannot and will not be served by the very people whose policies laid the basis for the fire.

Barry Quirk, who stepped in as RBKC Chief Executive after the fire, denies outright that there is any social cleansing at work. Ish’s disdain for the claim is all too clear. Quirk was for many years Chief Executive at Lewisham Council in south London, which is embroiled in gentrification and regeneration scandals.

Ish declares that “the state, the government and local council failed us. In the aftermath of the fire it continued to fail us.” Quirk expresses his “concern,” while claiming he had heard from council staff they had been doing things and “maybe people weren’t aware of them.”

One resident comments that the streets are quieter now, but he is not talking about passivity. He is describing both a recognition of and an attempt to overcome the “divide and rule” tactics employed against young people.

The voices from local residents demonstrate a growing recognition that any response to Grenfell must be directed towards a reorganisation of society in the interests of the working class, rather than the profits of a handful of corporate robbers. “Not just to pick up where the council fails,” as Ish states.



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