

Families and survivors hold seven-month commemoration of Grenfell Tower fire

Our reporters

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Around 1,500 people, including survivors and the families of those who died in last year's Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, staged their monthly commemoration Silent March on January 14.

Marchers carried photographs and placards with details of their loved ones who perished in the fire. They held large green heart-shaped banners and placards with slogans including "Justice for Grenfell" and "Truth."

Flowers and candles were carried by many marchers through the streets of North Kensington. Along the route, people stood by to pay their respects, while others watched in silence from their windows.

In reference to the fact that the vast majority of survivors have still not been rehoused months after the fire, one participant carried a placard reading "Homes and Justice for Survivors and Families!"

Firefighters from the Red Watch at North Kensington fire station—the first to arrive at the scene of the fire—lined the street at Ladbroke Grove tube station. Several survivors went to shake the hands of the firefighters.

Just days before the march, KPMG—the project managers of the official government inquiry into the fire—were forced to stand down after it was revealed the firm had audited the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council and two companies involved in the cladding of Grenfell Tower in flammable material, Rydon and Celotex. All are supposed to be under investigation by the Inquiry and Metropolitan Police for their role in the fire.

The previous day, the Socialist Equality Party-initiated Grenfell Fire Forum held its fifth meeting in North Kensington. Members and supporters of the forum distributed hundreds of copies of the article, "Fraud of official inquiry into Grenfell fire exposed by

forced withdrawal of project management adviser" to marchers.

Natasha, from Willesden in north west London, read the leaflet before the march started. She told us that the response from the authorities since the fire was "far from satisfactory. There is no solid investigation. The sentence that struck me in the leaflet was the line that 70 people perished in homes managed by the state.

"It's sad because people thought straight away this [cover-up] would happen. People thought, 'We need a real inquiry.' And they've done exactly what we thought they would do. It's confirming that the state doesn't care and they don't value workers' lives."

Looking around at the growing crowd ahead of the march, Natasha said, "This response shows that people are not going to stop meeting every month till they get justice. I think they will win eventually.

"I live relatively near. I came straight down here the morning after the fire with some blankets and gave them to one of the hand-out shelters. Seeing the building like that was one of the most shocking sights I will ever witness.

"It really hit me that it's been seven months and people have not been rehoused. You don't want people to forget about this. It's a continuing tragedy."

Asked her thoughts on the police inquiry and why no one had yet been arrested or charged for the deaths, she said, "Why isn't it being treated as a crime? Right at the start people were saying that some people might go down for it, but it won't be the people at the top."

In response to why she thought that the victims of the Grenfell tragedy had been treated appallingly, she said, "It's the capitalist state that are not treating people right. The same reason why the fire happened is the same reason why they are not being treated right. It's a continuation of that treatment."

Describing the housing conditions in Willesden, Natasha said, “It’s not got as many rich [people] as here, but it’s got Queen’s Park, which is just 15 minutes over there and is very wealthy. In Queen’s Park, a rich house would go for a million pounds or two. Willesden and Harlesden are being gentrified slowly. I think most of London has estates two minutes from rich, big detached houses.”

Natasha noted that the fire could have easily been in a tower block in Willesden: “Lots of people from my school know families who lived in Grenfell. Some people live in Trellick Tower [a 31-storey block of flats in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea].”

Asked if she had noticed a change in workers’ consciousness since the fire, Natasha said she had: “People now talk about the Triangle Factory fire in New York about a century ago, and I think it is pivotal. Grenfell crosses so many things like class and housing and safety. It brings up so many issues that Londoners are facing today.”

Regarding the Triangle fire, she said, “This is different as this is housing and Triangle was workers being locked-in. But laws were changed after that fire and people just said, ‘This can’t happen again’. Grenfell has made people realise that things are not fine. You can still die if you are placed in a certain situation.”

Alim Karim is a teacher. This was the first Silent March he attended. He said, “The Grenfell victims deserve justice. My view is that there is enough evidence for a criminal prosecution.

“It’s very important we stay here and make it clear this is not going to go away.

“From what you were saying about KPMG, if they had connections with the council and two companies responsible for the cladding, whoever appointed KPMG to the inquiry has some questions to answer.

“I think those responsible are those who made the decisions to put the cladding on. Ultimately the council are responsible. The management company [who ran Grenfell tower—the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation] was created by the council. The chain of command leads to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

“Fire safety regulation has been taken away from the public sector through private companies, so they are just paying for a certificate and concern for the public is

not there anymore. I think these problems are a nationwide issue.

“Communities are being forced to leave town centres. The knock-on effect is what you are seeing with all this homelessness. Housing should go back to its original function, which is about housing people, not making money out of people.”

Antonio is from Italy. He said, “Look, there is no investigation to be done. We already know what happened. The fact is that in this country, people are put in a ghetto, put in a building in terrible conditions in a very wealthy neighbourhood where workers, immigrants and refugees are not to be shown. The authorities just hide them there in Grenfell, trying to make the building look better by placing flammable cladding on it, and because of that, all these people died.

“The hypocrisy of the investigation simply shows clearly there is nothing to investigate. This is a class war. Capitalism is killing everyday through different facets, and this just another facet of class warfare.

“The victims need housing and should be housed in the empty apartments in and around the borough, in Notting Hill, in Hammersmith, etc. I live around here, and I know how many apartments remain empty. Can these buildings and apartments remain empty while the victims must remain in hostels in a life deprived of human dignity? We should forget about the laws and start to think in terms of class and social justice.”



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