

UK: Grenfell fire inquiry withholds vital evidence from the bereaved and survivors

Paul Mitchell
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The fraudulent nature of the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire was exposed once again during last week's session laying out the structure and timetable for questioning witnesses.

It was revealed that vital documents have been withheld from lawyers representing relatives of the 71 people who died in the inferno on June 14 last year, the survivors and local residents.

Richard Millett QC, lead counsel for the inquiry chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, opened the procedural hearing by saying that phase one of the inquiry, dealing with how the fire started, would begin May 21. Phase two, covering why it occurred, will take place at an unspecified time in the future.

Phase one will open with tributes ("pen portraits") to those who perished, followed two weeks later by questioning the first witnesses by inquiry lawyers.

Lawyers for the bereaved, survivors and local residents will only be allowed to question witnesses, with Moore-Bick's permission, on a case-by-case basis. They will be prevented from raising issues of a "social, economic and political nature."

For the same reason, no campaigning organisations or political bodies were included in the list of core participants (CPs) published last week. On the list were 504 individuals, who were bereaved due to the fire, survivors and local residents.

Also included are 18 companies involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, two fire service unions, and seven state organisations, including the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC), the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation—the tenant management organisation which managed the Tower on behalf of the council, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and three government ministries.

The narrow remit given to the lawyers of the bereaved,

survivors and local residents by Moore-Bick makes a mockery of the claims that allowing core participants in to "monitor" the conduct of proceedings was a great advance in accountability and inclusiveness.

Following Millett's introduction and claims that disclosure of documents was proceeding smoothly, it became clear that the opposite was the case. Pete Weatherby QC, representing 73 of the bereaved and survivors, declared that only two months before the questioning of witnesses begins, of the 330,000 documents gathered by the inquiry, "[W]e have had only 1,962 documents disclosed to us, mostly individual photos of the building or the inside of the building." This amounts to "just one half of one percent" of the total.

According to Weatherby, none of the "mass of the material" gathered by the MPS in their criminal investigations had been disclosed, nor had the documentation sent to the inquiry's nine experts four months ago. He called for the release of film footage, emergency "999" calls, statements from firefighters and their commanders, emergency service radio communications, firefighting documents and post-mortem reports.

Weatherby explained that "without effective disclosure it puts us in a position where our clients, bereaved and survivors CPs are simply not going to be in a position to effectively participate or their effective participation in the whole process is going to be severely diminished. ... To question witnesses we need the material."

Weatherby noted the failure to disclose the 415 statements made by firefighters, who will be the first witnesses to be questioned in June. It transpires that the MPS, who took the statements, have held up their release for months claiming they could jeopardise its own investigations and demanding to vet each one and redact information. However, to date no one has been questioned, let alone charged, by the police in relation to

the fire and there is no likelihood of this happening in the foreseeable future. The forensic stage of the criminal investigation is unlikely to be completed until 2019 and the full investigation could take years to complete.

Weatherby stated that “it is difficult to see how the disclosure of firefighters’ statements could have any adverse impact on the criminal process.”

As to the “position statements,” in which the corporate and state CPs were supposed to list the “key issues” and provide them to the inquiry by February 9, Weatherby said not only had some been delayed or not been produced at all, but “to describe them as position statements maybe is going a little too far.”

“In almost none of the position statements to date has any real assistance to the inquiry [been given] beyond the processes and contractual arrangements.

“As to key issues, why the fire spread, what caused or contributed to such terrible loss of life it seems to us, with one notable exception, that’s absent from all of the position statements received so far.”

Danny Friedman, speaking for five legal firms representing 277 CPs, added, “As of today, we are yet to see any public admissions by the council or the various contractors that any features of the refurbishment were causative of the deaths” and that the position statements “are silent on this point.”

Another lawyer, Sam Stein QC, criticised the government’s Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety— set up after the Grenfell fire, chaired by Dame Judith Hackitt and due to report soon. He said the review committees had been “populated” by the corporations and state organisations and that there was no Grenfell Tower group or expert on them.

In other developments last week, RBKC sought to increase its external legal services budget from £3.5 million to £5 million, primarily to protect councillors and officers in the Grenfell inquiry and criminal investigation.

It was revealed that Rydon, the lead construction company, paid £8.7 million to refurbish Grenfell Tower between 2014 and 2016, saw its profits rise 50 percent last year. Also, the salary of its highest-paid director increased by 8 percent to £459,000.

Rydon decided not to set aside money to cover potential losses or expenses related to the fire, confident of the result of the inquiry. The firm’s accounts for the year to September 2017, said, “Rydon has reviewed the specific work carried out by Rydon Maintenance Limited and given the limited nature of the work commissioned, the approvals received in relation to it and the

interrelationship with work undertaken by other parties, no provision has been made in the accounts for any matters arising from these tragic events.”

Figures released last week show the government will probably fail to permanently rehouse all those made homeless by the Grenfell Tower fire within a year as it promised. Of the 209 households needing rehousing, only 62 have so far moved into permanent new accommodation.

At the same time as the Grenfell inquiry was holding its procedural hearing, and in a warning to those taking part, scores of core participants walked out of the Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI), objecting to the chair granting anonymity to undercover police officers. The UCPI was set up four years ago and still hasn’t started hearing evidence from police officers or those directly affected by spying.

The events of last week are proof that everything is being done to ensure that the guilty in political and corporate circles evade justice. They confirm the ongoing state-orchestrated cover-up of the real causes of the “social murder” that occurred at Grenfell Tower, at the centre of which is the Moore-Bick inquiry.

The Grenfell Tower fire symbolises everything that is rotten in a social order dominated by the selfish concerns of a corrupt financial oligarchy, contemptuous of the broad mass of working people and youth. The entirely avoidable loss of life was the result of the devastation capitalism has created in Britain and internationally, due to a deliberate and historically unprecedented transfer of social wealth from the working class to the super-rich.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (UK), will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday, April 21, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend. Details below:

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday April 21, 4 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road)

For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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