

London residents draw connection between Grenfell and Kemerovo fires

Our reporters
7 April 2018

The March 25 fire at the Winter Cherry shopping mall and entertainment centre in Kemerovo in Russia took the lives of at least 64 people, including 41 children—with dozens injured and still missing. The parallels with last June’s inferno that claimed 72 lives in Grenfell Tower, London were both obvious and disturbing.

The same callous disregard for public safety was evident in both incidents, with basic fire safety measures either not in place or ignored by the relevant authorities. Most of the children who perished in the Winter Cherry mall fire did so because the doors of the cinema on the fourth floor were locked. Many of the fire exits were blocked and the alarm and sprinkling system didn’t work.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to London residents about the fire in Kemerovo.

Caul, who is an active supporter of the fight for justice for the victims of the Grenfell fire, said, “The Winter Cherry tragedy in Russia brought back Grenfell for me, with the reported numbers who perished, and fire alarms that didn’t work.

“What struck me was that [Russian President] Putin came out and said people will be held to account, such as those responsible for safety. People have already been detained for questioning in Russia, unlike here.

“[British Prime Minister Theresa] May’s response to Grenfell was so appalling, she didn’t even take the opportunity to be seen to be a bit more compassionate.

“The majority of those killed in the Russian fire were children. I thought ‘Why on earth is this happening?’ You have accidents, but this is no coincidence this massive loss of life, 72 in Grenfell, 64 in Kemerovo, in peacetime! It’s through gross negligence, deliberate or otherwise.

“Whoever signed off on the [flammable] cladding

used on Grenfell said to themselves, ‘God forbid if there’s a fire, people will die.’ That’s the level of contempt they hold us in.”

Referring to the government’s public inquiry headed by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, Caul said, “I don’t think we need a public inquiry. It is likely to be a whitewash. As a result of my experience, I think all politicians are untrustworthy and will use any situation to their advantage.”

Steven lived in a flat just yards from Grenfell Tower and had to live in a hotel for months. Last month, he was finally rehoused by the local council.

He said of the Kemerovo fire, “How many more times do people need to learn lessons about fire safety? The fire doors at Grenfell were not fire doors. They are supposed to keep fire out, but they went up like Rizla [cigarette] paper. They are cutting corners, it is what big corporations do. It is either, ‘I don’t give a toss’ or ‘I just take the money.’ The owners should be saying, ‘This is my building, I take the responsibility.’ These people should go to prison, they’ve broken health and safety laws.”

Daniel Renwick is a west London resident and, along with Ish—who was born and lived in Grenfell tower for 25 years—made the documentary film, *Failed by the State: The Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell*. The film tells the truth about the causes of the Grenfell fire—the deregulation, austerity and social cleansing policies carried out by local and central government.

He said, “Neoliberalism and corporatism breed structural neglect and a callous indifference to life by design. Russia, which experienced the breakneck processes of neoliberalism under [President Boris] Yeltsin, has within the fabric of its plutocracy, the same disregard for human life.

“We extend our deepest sympathies with those

affected. The deployment of riot police and the dismissal of youth mobilisations for justice mirror the contempt we saw in the wake of Grenfell.

“Where the Russian judiciary have detained five people for the fire, in stark difference to the British courts, it seems that state officials will be absolved of responsibility. It’s a shame that Russia, which often supports movements for justice abroad, cannot seem to find the same levels of empathy towards its own subjects.

“Those who question the state should be told the truth and afforded every bit of compensation they are entitled to, not dismissed as criminals.”

Julie, a mother of two grown-up daughters and resident of West London, said, “I feel sympathy for those affected in Kemerovo. Grenfell happened because safety regulations were abandoned. It’s due to cutbacks, the same in Russia.

“Some of the greatest victories for the working class were regulations, like over child labour. The media call health and safety red tape, they say it’s inconvenient. But we ended up with regulations because of disasters in the past.”

Social media reflected similar sentiment. A Twitter comment from the UK read, “I can’t help but draw comparisons between Grenfell and the early stories coming out of Kemerovo after the shopping centre fire. Avoidable deaths in places people should feel safe.”

Another tweet read, “Such an appalling tragedy, many parallels with the dreadful Grenfell Tower fire last year. Forgetting for now the row between governments and remembering the ‘ordinary’ people of Russia.”

Commenting on the March 27 protest by residents in Kemerovo against the regional government and central government of Vladimir Putin, a London resident wrote:

“Watching live a rally in Kemerovo. People are demanding answers regarding why this terrible tragedy in which so many children killed, happened. A young woman said ‘I am an independent woman & I want the truth. I do not trust the authorities’. Many parallels with #Grenfell.”

Another tweet by the London resident said, “The rally in #Kemerovo is growing. People are demanding the truth regarding numbers of victims, and the bringing to justice of those responsible. I know the #Grenfell

community understand this all too well.”

In Russia, many people expressed their horror at the basic lack of fire safety measures in the mall on social media.

One wrote, “The fire exits were CLOSED! No alarm, no evacuation, F***, what is this? [It’s] the 21st century! Unbelievable!”

Another wrote, “Ordinary citizens will always pay for the negligence of greedy suits, as long as the ‘elite’ of society does not start treating them like human beings.”

Another commented, “It is horrifying to recognize that in such a great power [the government] saves on everything, and ordinary people have to pay for that. People wake up!”

A Russian blogger recounted all the fire safety violations at the Winter Cherry mall and then posted a picture of the burning Grenfell tower. He commented, “The Grenfell Tower in London, very recently. Cheap housing, which the greedy owner wrapped in burning plastic...” *The author also recommends: Regional governor Tuleev resigns in wake of Kemerovo fire in Russia* [4 April 2018] *Russia: Protests against officials erupt in wake of Kemerovo fire* [28 March 2018] *Russia: At least 64 dead, including many children, in horrific shopping mall fire* [27 March 2018]

*** *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: **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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