

Testimony to Grenfell Fire inquiry paints devastating picture of social murder

Robert Stevens
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It took less than 48 hours from the opening of the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire to expose it as a cover-up.

Tuesday was the second day of moving commemorations by the bereaved families of those that died. Scheduled to last for up to two weeks, the initial statements made included several family members insisting that they would not accept any more lies and evasions from those they hold responsible.

The inquiry heard from Hisam Choucair, who lost six members of his family in the inferno, and from Karim Mussilhy, who lost his uncle, Hesham Rahman. The inquiry also heard a commemoration of Debbie Lemprell by her mother, Miriam, which was read out by Michael Volpe, the director of the opera where Debbie worked. Resha Ibrahim spoke about her sister Rania and two nieces, who also perished. Nick Burton, the widower of Maria Del Pilar “Pily” Burton, who died in hospital after the fire and is its 72nd victim, gave a moving tribute.

The last 12 months have seen the Conservative government and Kensington and Chelsea council treat the Grenfell bereaved and survivors with utter contempt—with many still living in hotels or temporary accommodation, despite repeated promises to rehouse them. Tuesday witnessed yet another example of the crass insensitivity of the authorities for families who remain deeply traumatised by the terrible events of June 14, 2017.

Around 20 survivors walked out in shock as video footage was shown during the tribute for the Choucair family. Included in the footage was Grenfell Tower on fire and people trapped in the building. The distress caused by the footage led one woman to collapse, with paramedics being called in to assist. People were still running out of the room before the footage was finally switched off, with the inquiry delayed for 30 minutes.

Those responsible for the sessions failed to issue a warning beforehand about the contents of the video, as

they had promised to do.

Hisam Choucair’s lost loved ones were his mother, Sirria Choucair, 60, a hospital caterer who lived on the 22nd floor; his sister, Nadia, 33, a nursery teacher, who lived in a neighbouring flat, and her husband Bassem, 38, a Marks and Spencer supervisor. Also taken were Nadia and Bassem’s three daughters, Mierna, 13, Fatima, 11, and Zaynab, 3.

Hisam said the fate of the Grenfell residents had been sealed as a result of the 2014-16 refurbishment of the block agreed by the Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation (KCTMO) on behalf of the council, which covered the entire building in flammable cladding.

He said of Nadia and her family, “They were proud of where they lived, but that all changed with the refurbishment. She had so many problems with the contractors, so much trouble with the council. There were many times when the lift broke down, which was terrible for my mother. It made it virtually impossible for her to leave the building. I was never happy with the building. I always had a bad feeling about it.”

Hisam recalled how, on the night of the fire, he received a call at around 2.20 a.m. from his brother, informing him that Grenfell was in flames. He ran to the tower, he said, “I found the building completely engulfed with flames.” Unable to contact his family, he said, “We had to stand there for hours, helpless, watching them all burn to death.

“I have to live with my family ripped apart for the rest of my life. I don’t see this as a tragedy; I see it is an atrocity, because essentially there is segregation between the rich and the poor. I think they call it a postcode lottery.”

The inquiry led by Justice Sir Martin Moore-Bick will tolerate the most painful accounts of loved ones lost, but when the truth begins to emerge—with the guilty parties openly condemned—the default position is to warn about

the implications of such statements.

Karim Mussilhy's commemoration for his uncle, Hesham Rahman, who lived on the top floor, represented a searing indictment of the sated political and corporate elite responsible.

He went into his uncle's flat after the fire. "I remember saying, 'I'm sorry, uncle. I'm sorry you had to go through this. I'm sorry you were left alone to die in this deathtrap.'"

He described terrible scenes inside the blackened, destroyed tower including, "The smudged fingerprints of adults and kids in that narrow staircase" that "will stay with me forever.

"This last memory of my uncle in his flat is what is giving me the strength to stand here right now, to fight for justice and change, and I promise you it will come. I promise you it will."

To this someone shouted "Yes" from the floor.

Karim continued, "Everyone should cherish the time they have with their family. Because until those in power listen and make changes to a system that fails, until then, only God knows how many homes are safe in this country."

He continued, "We are here to remember my uncle, Hesham Rahman, but to properly remember him, we have to remember why we are here. We are here because of failure. We are here because the system failed. The system was allowed to kill Hesham Rahman and 71 other souls, the very system designed to protect those people..."

"And now we are having an inquiry to find out what most of us already know, what we have been saying for years and not been listened to. We are here because nobody—nobody—listened, because those in authority were convinced they knew better. We are here because that system is broken. You can't sweep this under the carpet..."

"Materials that are clearly dangerous to use in buildings are still there up and down the country. Right now, right this second while I'm talking to you, these materials are still on these buildings, the very same ones that killed our families, that killed my uncle. It's been almost a year and only recently we've been told that the government's going to commit to remove this cladding. Not good enough is not the word.

"Right now, right this second, this is how our families are being remembered. They're being remembered by a culture of neglect. Institutional inertia hiding behind a system that has failed.

"We want the truth, not bureaucracy. We want light to be shone on what went wrong and who is responsible. We

do not want excuses, buck-passing, fancy technical arguments or any legal grey areas; we want an inquiry into the truth, the truth that people died because those in authority convinced themselves that they had done enough."

Council to the inquiry Bernard Richmond then interrupted saying, "Karim, can I just—I have to be very careful here, and I don't mean to interrupt you, but some of what you're about to say is for the evidential hearings."

Aware of the mood, Richmond added, "I'm not going to stop you, I'm not going to stop you."

Karim replied to Richmond, "I think, with all due respect, we've been censored enough. It's our time. Whether you like it or not, you will have to listen," to which someone from the floor said, "Speak, brother." Karim then received a standing ovation.

Within hours of the inquiry starting—after nearly a year—conditions are already being laid down about what can and cannot be said.

Richmond's intervention confirms that the first part of the inquiry, to run until at least December, is framed along the lines promised to Prime Minister Theresa May, that it will not discuss anything of a "social, economic and political nature," i.e., anything which would expose Grenfell as an act of social murder and a crime of capitalism.

To read the full statements of Hisam Choucair, Karim Mussilhy, Nick Burton and others go here.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday, May 26 at 2 p.m. at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. The meeting will discuss the opening of the inquiry and the issues raised in this article. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday May 26, 2 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

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

For further details, visit the Grenfell Fire Forum's Facebook page here



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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