

Labour and unions seek to corral social anger over Grenfell fire behind official inquiry

Robert Stevens
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On Saturday around 2,000 people demonstrated outside Prime Minister Theresa Mays' residence in Downing Street, in a rally called by the Justice for Grenfell group/Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

The protest was significantly smaller than the 10,000 or so who attended the Silent March, near Grenfell Tower in North Kensington, just three days previously, to mark the one-year anniversary of the inferno that claimed the lives of 72 people on June 14, 2017.

Simultaneous commemorative events and vigils were also held in other towns and cities, including Birmingham, Sheffield, Bradford, Bristol, Liverpool, Salford, Bolton, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

These events showed the extent of anger and solidarity that exists over the Grenfell fire. Thousands of tenants in social housing and privately-owned blocks are still living in buildings that are surrounded by the same kind of flammable cladding that allowed Grenfell Tower to be consumed by flames in a matter of minutes. Workers and youth nationally suffer the same devastating austerity, cost-cutting, and deregulation policies, including cuts to local fire services, as those who lived in Grenfell.

If Saturday's rally was far smaller, it was because the unions and Labour Party did little to mobilise for it. Only a very small fraction of the FBU's 40,000-plus membership were in attendance. This despite the fact that the media have now begun a smear campaign against fire-fighters, holding them responsible for the loss of lives at Grenfell. Two weeks ago it was announced that the Metropolitan Police are to investigate the London Fire Brigade over the "stay put" policy that saw many Grenfell residents told to remain in their residences.

Nor did the Trades Union Congress, or Britain's largest unions, Unite and Unison (both with over a

million members), organise support.

FBU leader Matt Wrack had to acknowledge this in his own remarks to the rally. Wrack, who is a former member and a close supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Party and its predecessor Militant, said that in the struggle ahead, "we cannot leave it to the community of north Kensington."

"This is a national issue... we need to build a mass movement," he said.

But his own remarks on the public inquiry into the fire were very circumspect. His union had raised their "concerns about whether that inquiry can fulfil the desire of the bereaved and fulfil the needs of the community to actually answer the real questions and to provide justice" but "were still participating" in it.

The FBU, "were in favour, where appropriate, of prosecutions," of those responsible for the fire, despite noting he had seen no change in the "criminal complacency" of the authorities in relation to fire safety in the year since.

His statements were of a piece with the political objective of the rally, which was to spread illusions that through public pressure on the official inquiry into the fire, justice can be achieved, and that a Corbyn-led government is the best means of ensuring this.

Speakers included Labour shadow chancellor John McDonnell and the Labour MP for Kensington and Chelsea, Emma Dent-Coad. A message was read from Labour shadow Housing Minister John Healey.

McDonnell and Dent-Coad made no criticism of the fact that more than a year after the tragedy, not a single person has been charged, let alone prosecuted, for the gross negligence and cost-cutting that led to the catastrophic loss of lives.

Labour is backing the inquiry even though its terms have been fixed under the 2005 Inquiries Act, which

specifically rules out criminal prosecutions.

Moreover, as proposed by its chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, in agreement with Prime Minister Theresa May, 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.

McDonnell spoke vaguely of “holding to account, those who through their actions, were responsible for the 72 deaths,” and claimed that Labour will “stand up against austerity when we go into government.”

Labour “will build a million new homes and half of them, we’ll be proud to call council homes again...” He concluded, “When they ask me as shadow chancellor, ‘how are we going to afford it’: Well the corporations and the rich are going to pay their taxes for a change... So the memorial to the 72 will be the generation after generation to come that will live in safety and will be housed decently in our capital city.”

Dent-Coad said she would contact Tory MPs in the House of Commons—who had shed a few crocodile tears on the anniversary—to get the backing for an unspecified “Grenfell debate” in parliament.

The aim is to divert social anger into official channels, with everyone being asked to wait for the inquiry’s conclusion, which could take years. In the meantime, the conditions that produced the Grenfell fire continue and worsen.

Labour is playing a key role in this. While McDonnell talks of ending austerity in the future, the reality is that Labour administrations—who run the councils in every major urban centre in the UK—are implementing savage spending cuts.

One of the first actions taken by Corbyn upon becoming Labour leader was to write a letter to Labour councils instructing them that they had to continue setting legal budgets, on pain of facing legal action. What this meant was that after having their budgets cut by central government, they had to keep imposing cuts. This policy they have continued to follow to the letter in London and nationwide.

Joe Delaney—who lived in a flat just next to Grenfell Tower and has only recently been temporarily rehoused by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council—spoke at the rally. He was the only one to raise the role of all the political parties of the ruling elite—Tory, Labour and Liberal—in the deregulation of

safety standards over the last decades.

He said, “A phrase I’ve heard since Martin Moore-Bick was appointed to the inquiry, and I’ve heard it in a lot of places, is ‘institutional indifference.’ And I think this is what we’ve seen a lot of in the last 30 or 40 years, from, I’m sad to say, governments of all colours that we’ve had in this country. It was Tony Blair’s [Labour] government who sold off the Building Research Establishment back in 1998 and that led to the commoditisation of building safety in the first place. Since the Tory-Lib Dem coalition came in 2010 we saw countless cuts to services that we now see are vital.”

Delaney said it was “absolutely disgusting” that the government and its media backers were seeking to shift the blame onto the fire brigade and individual fire fighters who tried to tackle an unprecedented blaze at Grenfell. He stated to applause and cheering, “Individual firemen did not close North Kensington fire station. Individual firemen did not make decisions that equipment had to be brought from Surrey that night in order to reach the top floors of that block. And it was individual firemen that I saw enter that place with breathing equipment and no helmets in a desperate attempt to get people out.”



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