UK: Protesters speak at demonstration to mark first anniversary of Grenfell fire

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those attending the demonstration outside Downing Street on Saturday, marking the first anniversary since the deadly June 14, 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. Most expressed the view that the official inquiry will result in a whitewash of the official neglect that precipitated the tragedy.

Pauline from Bromley in south London, "I came along today to stand with the people of Grenfell. I was also on the [monthly] Silent March [near Grenfell Tower] on Thursday. Before this I had never taken part in a demonstration in my life.

"When I saw the Grenfell fire I was in disbelief. I never thought a building could go up in flames like that in the 21st century. I cried."

"I see tower blocks like Grenfell in Croydon near to where I live and the cladding on these buildings failed safety tests. This could have happened to anyone. Why would you wrap concrete in plastic?

"The people that lived in Grenfell are the workers who do many of the jobs that are not well rewarded or recognised, making things shiny and clean in this city—sweeping the roads, cleaning the offices and hospitals. Yet they were not deemed worthy of proper and safe housing."

Pauline has no faith that the government-sanctioned public inquiry into the fire will establish the truth and bring the guilty to account. She said, "The criteria for the inquiry will mean it will have a predetermined outcome. Nobody will be held to account, like those who signed off the paper work for the flammable cladding. They want to whitewash it all. They think by allowing the families to give testimony and tell their story to the inquiry they can assuage them. But they will not be held to account. It is time for people to rise up."

She supported the assessment of the Socialist Equality Party that the Labour Party also bears its share of responsibility for the deregulation and cost cutting that resulted in Grenfell being made into a death trap. "I believe Labour should be held to account. The Tories picked up from where Labour left off with all the deregulation and privatisation. You cannot hark back to Labour, it does not represent the working class. We need a new party."

Joyce from Hackney in east London said, "The Grenfell fire is not about ethnicity or race, it is about class. All those who promote identity politics are feeding their own careers. We need to address how to unite the working class—black and white. Those on low pay, the dispossessed and politically disenfranchised who have no voice.

"I am not optimistic about the outcome of this inquiry. There are likely to cite 'multiple factors' for the fire with no one held directly responsible. There is a desire for fundamental change. The right to housing is a fundamental social right. I've been to Labour Party meetings. The Labour councils have their environmental projects, but they have nothing on poverty and social rights. They talk about protecting public services but dump more work on the workers who have to provide it.

"Those in power are making a complete mess of our lives. They are completely detached and divorced from social reality. They can sign off on the paperwork which led to the Grenfell fire and go home to their nice little houses and nice little families.

"I want to see a better world without inequality. It is not about begging for more entitlements or means tested benefits. It is about social rights."

Geoff from Bristol travelled to London to take part in the march. He attended because, "First of all, an awful lot, hundreds, of other tower blocks around the country are similar to Grenfell. Then that coincided with the cutbacks—what they see as cutting back on red tape and bureaucracy as the Tories see it, and therefore endangering people's lives.

"Several people died in [the] Lakanal House [fire in 2006] and yet nothing was done. There were no sprinklers, the wrong cladding and no fire escape. All of these things seemed to be of prohibitive cost as far as the authorities were concerned."

Hedia, a secondary school teacher from London said, "I know in my heart it is a political issue what happened to Grenfell. Living on a council estate, I knew that me and a lot of people that I know and love and that a lot of innocent people could be out at risk because of the austerity that has ensued in this country since the Tory government.

"We need to think: who does this government serve? It doesn't serve normal people like you and I. It doesn't serve the people who died in Grenfell. It serves the private companies and investors of the sort who provided the cladding used in Grenfell. It's going to serve to protect those who are

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responsible for this. I knew in my heart that there would be no justice for the people who put up the cladding."

Hedia said the inquiry "will definitely whitewash the events that have happened" and a struggle for the truth would need to be "street-led" based on "bringing more awareness to the fact that this is not a single issue. That Grenfell itself can happen anywhere in London where there is flammable cladding. We need to protest against the private companies who are still allowed to operate in social housing when they really shouldn't be."

After the fire, said Hedia, "I felt compelled to fight in an artistic way for the people who I felt had been done so wrong by austerity and the British government that I wrote a poem blaming several people: [Prime Minister] Theresa May, and the man who put up the cladding. To think that he only saved £2 per square meter in order to put up something that risked the lives of people. Comparing human life to money and exchanging human safety for money—that for me captured the problem at the heart of British politics."

Of those seeking to establish the truth about Grenfell and whistle blowers, including WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange, Hedia said, "Anyone who exposes even a glimmer of truth about what goes on behind closed doors will be persecuted by the British government. Because you can't expose their deepest secrets and get away with it. It's very easy to dismiss the truth when you start fearmongering, when you start branding people as … crazy people when in reality they are people trying to shed some light on certain issues. It's one of their tactics to discredit people."

Carmela is a childcare professional. "To protest on behalf of the Grenfell survivors and the community and the firefighters. Now there is a very dangerous tendency [by the government and its media supporters] to start blaming the firefighters and that is not acceptable. It is abominable to allow that to happen.

"The firefighters experienced a living hell, still they went in all night long. At six o'clock in the morning they were still saving lives. The firefighters worked hard, they've been traumatised, they came out distraught, they did everything they could. It's amazing none of them died. They did a superhuman job to save 60 plus people in the living hell of Grenfell Tower.

"We need justice and we need justice from the right sources: I mean government, the council, the private companies and profiteers, the TMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Association who managed Grenfell Tower for the royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council], all the organisations involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell.

"The irresponsible, criminal behavior of private companies allowed by the government, the TMO, and RBKC to organise and refurbish a building like Grenfell. It had been a very safe building. If they had not done that fancy [cladding] coverage, the fire would never have happened. The man in whose flat the fire started, he had concerns that his windows were not fit properly, and that is what allowed the fire to escape and then go all around the building."

Asked her thoughts on the fact that not a single person has been arrested or charged over the Grenfell deaths, Carmela said, "I feel sick, I feel sick on behalf of the victims, the families, the community, London and the country. It is unbelievable that after a year there are still people who have not been fully rehoused. Survivors who went through traumatic, dreadful experiences still have to be in temporary accommodation, which is not fit for purpose. Theresa May, on day one, said their priority would be to rehouse the survivors… May, you ruined the lives of so many people with your party and your profiteer politics and the organizations like the TMO that your party helped to build from the 80s onwards."

Hamish works for Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Service as a firefighter. He said, "I wanted to show solidarity with the people of Grenfell and the London Fire brigade who responded on that terrible night.

"I think it's disgusting, it's an outrage [that the London Fire Brigade was being investigated by the Metropolitan police]. The firefighters on that night and emergency fire control operators did everything they possibly could to save as many lives as they possibly could. Everyone who worked that night will be traumatized because of what they saw and what they heard. We do need an inquiry, but an inquiry where we have faith there will be justice.

Asked his view of the causes of the fire, he said, "At the moment we still don't know for sure, but I think a lot of people suspect the truth. And that may be a combination of 40 years of privatization of local housing associations, 40 years of profit motive in local government and local housing, and approximately 15 years of deregulation of fire safety laws.

"If the police haven't, as you say, spoken to the leaders of the council, of the companies who produced the cladding which seemed to be on fire that night, then that is very, very strange."

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