

UK: Corporations seek to evade responsibility for role in Grenfell Tower fire

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The companies that bear joint responsibility for Grenfell Tower's lack of compliance with building regulations and basic safety standards—resulting in the inferno that cost 72 lives—are doing their utmost to evade responsibility and pass the buck at the public inquiry into the fire.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC), the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), which managed Grenfell Tower on behalf of the council, and the Rydon construction firm, which oversaw the refurbishment that surrounded the building in highly flammable cladding, addressed the inquiry during its first evidential sessions. Arconic, the manufacturer of the cladding, and Celotex, the manufacturer of the flammable insulation—that emitted vast quantities of poisonous cyanide gas as it burnt—also addressed the inquiry.

The companies prefaced their initial statements by shedding crocodile tears for the bereaved and survivors, but then went on to explain reasons why they should not be held responsible for what happened. They all stated they would not respond fully until seeing all the evidence.

Rydon won the £8.6 million contract to refurbish Grenfell Tower from the KCTMO. The company made a profit of £14.3 million in 2016, on a turnover of £271 million.

Rydon's main concern in its opening statement was to insist that no discussion should be held on what happened before the fire, saying the first phase of the inquiry was not scheduled to cover that period. This was to prevent any examination of its role and responsibility in the critical events prior to the fire.

Rydon referred to the widespread use of cladding that was just as dangerous as the flammable cladding on Grenfell to make their own gross failures regarding the safety of the Grenfell residents look better by comparison.

As the main contractor, Rydon was responsible for the litany of serious safety breaches as described by expert

witnesses. In addition to the cladding panels made of combustible material, more than 100 non-compliant fire doors were used, a firefighting lift “didn't work” and a single stairway was too narrow to be compliant with safety standards.

Arconic, a US-based transnational company with a turnover of \$3.4 billion in the first quarter of 2018, supplied nearly 7,000 square metres of cladding used in the refurbishment of the tower that turned it into a death trap. Arconic's lawyer stated that the cladding panels were “at most, a contributing feature” to the fire spread and that the cladding panels “did not render inevitable the catastrophe which ensued.”

Pete Weatherby QC, representing survivors and the bereaved, said in response, “If that were the test, we are all lost.”

By minimising the role of the panels in the fire, Arconic directly contradicted the evidence from fire safety experts Dr. Barbara Lane and Professor Luke Bisby. Lane concluded that the Reynobond 55PE supplied by Arconic “contributed to the most rapid of the observed external fire spread,” while Bisby stated that the panels were the “primary cause of upward vertical fire spread, downward vertical fire spread, and lateral fire spread.”

Celotex issued a one-page statement expressing “its deepest sympathy to the families of all those who lost their lives as a result of the fire,” but refused to say anything of substance.

CEP Architectural Facades, which fabricated part of the tower's cladding and windows, referred to the limited disclosure of documents by others to justify their own silence. They also refused to say anything substantial until they had been allowed access to the charred remains of Grenfell Tower.

The inquiry is revealing how unsafe Grenfell Tower was for human habitation on the night of June 14, 2017. The smoke ventilation system that should have channelled

poisonous fumes away was not working. The company that made it, PSB UK—a subsidiary of German ventilation firm Witt & Sohn—explained that Rydon had not contracted them to provide maintenance. PSB UK had responded to a request for a quote from Rydon to investigate and fix a fault, but the quote had not been acted upon by Rydon. The cost of fixing the fault was estimated at just £1,800.

Harley Facades, which installed the Reynobond cladding and were paid £2.6 million for doing so, issued the briefest of statements saying little more than, “We offer our sincere condolences to all those concerned.”

Responding to the silence and evasions of Rydon, et al, Stephanie Barwise QC, representing some survivors and bereaved, stated, “Despite their words of condolence to the victims, these corporates have no desire to assist this inquiry.”

She noted, “Before the refurbishment Grenfell was constructed of virtually incombustible concrete. It was, however, covered by the polyethylene cladding, now openly described by some within the industry as petrol. It is inhumane to remain silent when so many seek understanding and answers, answers which are within the corporates’ gift.

“The inability to produce a basic account of how, if at all, they considered Grenfell Tower complied with the Building Regulations is itself indicative of the culture of noncompliance which Arup’s fire expert Dr. Lane has identified.”

In her statement to the inquiry, Lane attacked a “culture of noncompliance” on fire safety that contributed to “a disproportionately high loss of life” on June 14 last year. She was “particularly concerned about the maintenance regime of the active and passive fire protection measures ... multiple automatic systems such as the control of the fire life and the smoke ventilation system, appear not to have operated as required.”

Barwise said, “Their stance that they need more than the documents they already have before engaging at all with any of the criticisms made of them is demonstrably untenable and disingenuous.

“These contractors should not be allowed, by their deliberate refusal to participate, to derail determination of the compliance issue, even though we are concerned with blatant noncompliance.”

Also speaking on behalf of the families, Danny Friedman QC said that he represented bereaved people and survivors who were attending the inquiry in a “calm rage.” What was being examined was how a local

authority “instigated and oversaw a refurbishment of a social housing high-rise tower block in such a way as to render it a death trap.”

RBKC and the KCTMO had used public funds, paid to professionals, contractors and subcontractors, “none of whom have yet accepted any responsibility for their part in what happened.”

Another QC for one former resident said of the corporations, “Their strategy is clear: keep your head down, say as little as possible, express sympathy, admit nothing, pass the buck, pretend it is all very complicated, minimise reputational damage and financial loss.”

The companies attending the inquiry are intent on evading justice and protecting their ability to make profits, at the expense of the lives of working class people. When it is in their interests to distort facts or hide them from view, they know they can do so with full confidence of the state.

Legal representatives of the companies have now addressed the inquiry. The evidence already in the public domain proves that decisions of RBKC, the KCTMO and these companies led to the deaths of 72 people, yet not a single person has been charged or even arrested for anything! The police claim that no such prosecutions can take place until their criminal investigation finishes, which could drag on for years to come.

The public inquiry and the police investigation are central to a concerted cover-up to ensure that the real criminals responsible for social murder evade justice. The move by the police, with the backing of the right-wing media at the beginning of the inquiry to shift blame for the 72 deaths to the London Fire Brigade—by saying they will be investigated over their response to the fire and their advice to residents to “stay put”—is further confirmation of this.



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