The July 3 Whitstable fire and the Grenfell inferno

Statement by the Grenfell Fire Forum
12 July 2018

The fire that broke out at the Whitstable House tower block, North Kensington, London on July 3 caused great anxiety to its residents and the local community, which includes survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire.

Whitstable House is known as the "tower next door" to Grenfell, which was destroyed on June 14 last year in the inferno that claimed 72 lives.

Many of the flats in Whitstable have a direct view of Grenfell, and its residents looked out in horror as many of their friends and neighbours perished.

The Whitstable fire broke out on the 16th floor of the 20-storey-high block, with black smoke pouring from the building. Four fire engines and 21 firefighters attended and the fire was quickly contained within part of one flat. No other flats were involved and nobody was hurt, with the incident declared over in less than an hour. Residents who were evacuated quickly returned to their homes.

The contrast with Grenfell is stark. Whitstable too has safety problems arising from years of neglect of its residents by the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—the management body of the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council.

In March 2017, prior to the Grenfell Fire, the Grenfell Action Group—which warned of an impending catastrophe at Grenfell—included Whitstable in a list of properties where no fire instructions were then on display.

In November last year, the LBC radio station found in Whitstable dangerous rubbish chutes, fire escapes with nearly immovable doors and flammable fire doors made of PVC Architrave. Front doors in the block were also surrounded with a flammable, expanding foam and a decision was made to replace or upgrade them—with the KCTMO also forced to check another 6,500 front doors under its management.

In 2008, 10-year-old Christian Castano fell to his death from Whitstable after leaning on an 18th floor landing window with a broken catch to wave to his friends. The fault had been reported repeatedly to KCTMO.

Yet despite all of this, the fire did not spread because of one key fact: Unlike Grenfell Tower, Whitstable House was *not* surrounded in highly flammable cladding and insulation. It had an entirely fire resistant concrete surface and looks much as it did when it was constructed in 1966.

Prior to its 2014-16 "refurbishment," overseen by the KCTMO on behalf of RBKC, Grenfell too had a concrete exterior.

Evidence emerging over the year, including that presented at the ongoing official government "public" inquiry, has repeatedly stressed that the rainscreen cladding and insulation on Grenfell was dangerous in the extreme. The combination of materials and installation was untested, and, together with Grenfell's other basic safety deficiencies, caused the terrifyingly rapid spread of a small kitchen fire in a flat on the fourth floor to engulf the entire 24-storey structure's external surface in minutes. The refurbished windows assisted the fire's return into the building.

The refurbishment was of a piece with the history of disregard for the safety of residents of Grenfell Tower. It was intended solely to prettify Grenfell so that rich residents living nearby would have a more pleasant view.

Every attempt is being made to conceal this key issue—that the installation of flammable cladding by RBKC, KCTMO and its corporate partners was the main reason for the Grenfell fire.

To this end, the fire at Whitstable was ignored by all

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but one national newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, though its account only described events.

Despite government pledges, nothing has been done to make safe the hundreds of public and privately-owned buildings in the UK that are covered in Grenfell-type cladding, representing a clear and present danger to the many thousands of residents living in them.

Meanwhile the official inquiry under Sir Martin Moore-Bick is presently focused on taking evidence of the firefighting operation amid media reports that London's Metropolitan Police are investigating and considering charging the London Fire Brigade, possibly under health and safety legislation, over its "stay put" policy.

The implication of this is that the brigade, management or possibly even individual firefighters might be deemed responsible, and even charged over Grenfell. The aim of this line of inquiry is to refocus attention away from corporate and governmental responsibility for Grenfell.

The Whitstable fire was almost simultaneous with evidence given to the inquiry by Michael Dowden, the first fire incident commander on the scene at Grenfell. Dowden was subjected to three days of gruelling questioning and explained that he had no previous experience of a fire behaving like the one he encountered.

His entire training and fire service practice were based on the assumption that fire would not spread rapidly over the external surface of a building. Coupled with the long-standing assumption of internal "compartmentation", whereby a fire cannot spread from one flat to another, this meant that tower block residents have, for decades, been advised by fire service workers and emergency call operators to "stay put—unless or until firefighters appear at the door to organise a controlled evacuation" and even then generally only from any immediately threatened flats.

The Whitstable fire suggests that the "stay put" policy is correct, that is, *if* compartmentation is not compromised.

Meanwhile, fully 13 months after the Grenfell fire, not a single person responsible for it has been brought to justice.

This must be opposed by all workers and young people throughout Britain and internationally.

Those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged. They include former London Mayor Boris Johnson, who imposed massive cuts in the fire services, Prime Minister Theresa May and her predecessors, David Cameron, Gordon Brown and the arch war criminal Tony Blair.

Those who were instrumental in the decision to add the cladding to Grenfell must be arrested and charged: Former RBKC leader, Nicholas Paget-Brown and his former deputy, Rock Feilding-Mellen, the former head of the KCTMO; Robert Black; the head of Rydon, CEO Robert Bond; and the Managing Director of Harley Facades, Ray Bailey.

We demand:

• Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!

• Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!

• Stop the scapegoating of firefighters!

• Quality public housing is a social right!

• For an emergency multi-billion pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be discussing the issues around the Whitstable and Grenfell fires at its next meeting on Saturday July 28 at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday July 28, 4 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

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

For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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