Grenfell Tower Fire inquiry testimony reveals tragic consequences of fire service cuts

Barry Mason
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On July 5 and 6, the Grenfell Tower Fire inquiry took testimony from Brian O'Keefe, watch manager at Kensington fire station. With 25 years in the fire service, he described the incident at Grenfell in West London on June 14, 2017, in which 72 people died, as the worst experience of his career.

After the initial fire in the kitchen of a flat on the Grenfell Tower's fourth floor had apparently been dealt with, things started to escalate quickly. O'Keefe explained: "It went from being a calm, good job, you know, the fire's out—to people screaming and shouting. The radio starts. My handheld radio started going with a message saying the fire's jumping. I don't know which firefighter it was, but somebody said there's fire on the fifth or the sixth, or there's fire on the fifth, there's fire on the fifth, and he kept repeating it in an excited, or in an alarmed way."

He described how the firefighters were shocked at the speed of the fire's spread and how calls from residents trapped in flats in the tower quickly overwhelmed those responding. A failure of radio communication equipment led to "runners" having to be used to get written messages to the bridgehead in the tower—from which point the fire fighting operation was being coordinated—as to the location of trapped residents. The runners had to dodge the lumps of blazing cladding that were beginning to rain down.

With the fire rapidly reaching higher and higher, O'Keefe ordered an aerial ladder to attend the incident. This was at 1:13 a.m. The nearest one, from Paddington fire station, took around 18 minutes to arrive.

O'Keefe was asked by Richard Millet QC, the inquiry lead counsel, whether at this point, i.e. 1:13 a.m., "Did you have any thoughts about whether the stay-put policy, the standing stay-put policy in place at Grenfell Tower, remained appropriate?" O'Keefe replied that he did not.

Even the aerial ladder from Paddington proved insufficient, as now the firefighters had to deal with the unprecedented scenario of a high-rise tower being ablaze from top to bottom and on every side. The unprecedented nature of the fire arose from the building having been clad in highly flammable material that rapidly spread the blaze.

Grenfell Tower, at 70 metres [230 feet] in height, dwarfs the maximum 30-metre range of aerial platforms used by the London Fire Brigade and eventually a 42-metre one had to be borrowed from Surrey, but this did not arrive until 1:32 a.m., by which time the fire had already reached the top of one side of the tower. The Surrey appliance is the tallest in the country, but still could not reach the top of Grenfell. In the end, 40 fire engines attended the fire but were unable to extinguish it.

The lack of high-rise platforms to tackle the blaze was exacerbated by the shortage of equipment. O'Keefe told the inquiry how he had sent firefighters into the inferno without "firefighting media [water] and breaking-in kit because we did not have enough of it," telling them to use any discarded equipment they might find on the stairs.

He continued: "For a period of time, there was no longer any crews [in breathing apparatus] left to deploy… We had used all our resources… I knew it was too dangerous and that their lives were in danger. This was not controlled; this was a desperate bid to rescue people."

In this "desperate bid" to save residents and with the shortage of appropriate equipment, firefighters were putting themselves at risk by going into flats to search for people without water and negotiating the lower floors without using their breathing apparatus to

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conserve them for higher floors. The disregard for their own safety led to the collapse of several firefighters due to the extreme heat.

In previous testimony, Christopher Secrett, a crew manager at North Kensington fire station, broke down in tears as he told the inquiry how he became aware of the intensity of the fire spreading around the outside of the building.

Secrett had been at the bridgehead set up on the second floor to coordinate the firefighting effort. He had gone outside to speak to the incident commander, Michael Dowden, when he became aware of the spread of the fire. He broke down as he described this moment to the inquiry.

Recovering his composure, Secrett explained, "The whole side of the building was on fire and there was no way we were are going to put that out quickly… The heat radiating was really intense. I could see a lot of sparking and fizzing of fires spreading everywhere. It was a big wall of fire and so intense. Whatever was fuelling it was doing a good job."

He described how, while the firefighters searched for victims, the situation began to deteriorate. "It all started going wrong for us all at once—we couldn't find who we were looking for, my air was running out… At that point I was very unsure whether we were going to get out or not. We had no way of communicating that back to the bridgehead."

He collapsed in the staircase; "My legs were wobbly from exhaustion."

Christopher Dorgu, based at Kensington Red Watch, gave evidence on July 9. He told the inquiry that he thought he was going to die as he stumbled and fell trying unsuccessfully to reach a 12-year-old girl in a pitch-black, smoke-logged stairwell on level 20 with his oxygen running low.

The firefighters were facing a double whammy—a building cosmetically modified to make it more visibly pleasing to rich residents in the area and thereby rendered a tinderbox awaiting a spark, and the impact of years of cutbacks to the fire service by all administrations regardless of political hue.

In 2012 Boris Johnson, the former foreign secretary who was then Conservative mayor of London, pushed through a 15 percent cut in the £448 million [$US593 million] London Fire Brigade budget. This led to the loss of 10 fire stations, including Knightsbridge in Kensington and Chelsea, 14 fire engines and over 500 firefighter posts. The borough now has just three fire stations to serve a population of 158,649 people.

When challenged over the cuts at a London Assembly meeting in September 2013, Johnson replied, "Get stuffed"—the authentic voice of the arrogant ruling elite.

Those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged, including Johnson, Prime Minister Theresa May and her predecessors, David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.

Those who were instrumental in the decision to add the cladding to Grenfell must also be arrested and charged, including former Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council leader, Nicholas Paget-Brown; his then deputy, Rock Feilding-Mellen, the former head of the council's housing management organisation; the CEO of Rydon, Robert Bond; and the Managing Director of Harley Facades, Ray Bailey.

– 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 raised by the recent Whitstable House fire on Saturday July 28, at 4 p.m., 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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