Grenfell Fire: Fire Brigades Union warned of cladding dangers 19 years ago

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The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has published a damning report showing successive governments ignored its warnings about building cladding systems nearly 20 years before the entirely avoidable fire that killed 72 at Grenfell Tower last year.

"The Grenfell Tower Fire: Background to an Atrocity" was launched at a meeting in Parliament this month and outlines the fatal impact of decades of deregulation of the fire service.

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack drew attention to the June 11, 1999 fire at the 14-storey Garnock Court block of flats in North Ayrshire, Scotland, in which William Linton was killed and five others injured.

After the fire, the FBU warned a House of Commons Select Committee investigation that cladding a tower block could provide "a vehicle for assisting uncontrolled fire spread up the outer face of the building." The fire could re-enter the building through windows and thus pose "a threat to the life safety of the residents above the fire floor."

"Actually, that's a prediction of what happened at Grenfell Tower," said Wrack, adding, "the scandal that lies behind it is nobody has actually acted on that warning that was given after a fire in 1999."

After the Garnock Court fire, Scottish building regulations were strengthened to reduce the fire risks, but not in England and Wales.

Wrack said the union now wanted to see "real change" as a result of the Grenfell Fire tragedy. It is not enough, he said, to keep talking about learning lessons: "Many of the lessons were already known, the question was that they were not being applied."

The FBU report covers the development and then erosion of fire safety regulations after the 1947 Fire Services Act, which established a national fire safety framework under the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC). Following serious fires in the 1950s and 1960s, safety provisions were further strengthened and centralised.

The FBU identify this general trend as having ended with the Thatcher government of 1979, which began a programme of deregulation and cuts that have continued to the present day, no matter the nominal affiliation of the government.

The most extensive deregulation was carried out by the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010). They abolished national standards of fire cover and the CFBAC, and eroded fire certification and its enforcement. When the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 was first introduced, the FBU warned that simply requiring its implementation "without providing either a duty to carry out inspections, or to develop an enforcement programme to do so" would not maintain the existing levels of public safety.

The undermining of fire safety intensified with the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. It imposed savage cuts in central funding for fire and rescue services, leading to the loss of nearly 12,000 jobs and slashed safety regulations under the cover of cutting "red tape." Further central funding cuts are planned up to 2020.

A 2015 National Audit Office report estimated central funding was cut by 28 percent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2015/16. There was also considerable variation between different fire and rescue authorities, with reductions ranging from 26 to 39 percent for that period. The union say that government oversight of fire and rescue was "lacklustre for a number of years before the Grenfell Tower fire."

The coalition government's slashing of regulations was particularly pronounced in the construction industry. Then Fire Minister Brandon Lewis spoke repeatedly against legislation for sprinkler provision arguing, for example, that "the part sprinklers play in any fire safety strategy should be determined by the findings of the owner or occupier's assessment of risk—not blanket regulation."

A 2012 report by the Department for Communities and Local Government advocated scrapping local building acts in order to save money. It noted, for example, that up to £357,400 could be saved in each tower block over 35 years by not installing or maintaining sprinklers, and up to £600,000 could be saved by not installing smoke extractors.

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The same disregard for public safety is apparent in the attitude to the retrofitting of older tower blocks. Most obviously, this involved the dangerous cladding used at Grenfell Tower and the failure to fit smoke alarms and sprinklers, but it also meant undermining existing safety systems and mechanisms in older buildings.

The FBU report proves that every aspect of fire safety had failed at Grenfell Tower long before the fire broke out. It reveals why there has been a concerted move by the ruling class and its media to try to shift responsibility onto the firefighters who were faced with the devastating results of years of deregulation and cuts on the night of the fire.

The complacency in ruling circles with which the FBU report was met is summed up in the response of Communities Secretary James Brokenshire. He blithely claimed the government's reaction to Grenfell Tower was "to establish a comprehensive building safety programme, [we] issued clear guidance to building owners and committed to a full review of the building regulatory system."

Brokenshire said the government "intends to ban the use of combustible materials" on the exterior of tower blocks. That they have not done so already gives the lie to any claims that any justice or amends can come from an inquiry organised by those responsible for Grenfell in the first place.

In opposition to Brokenshire, the bereaved and survivors of Grenfell are demanding action now. Michael Mansfield QC, who is representing a number of them at the inquiry, has submitted a list of urgent recommendations to ensure safety, including an immediate ban on cladding systems containing materials not classed as "non-combustible."

The FBU is critical of, but not opposed to, the government's public inquiry into the fire. The union declares its "long view" is aimed at addressing the culture of cuts and deregulation that have led up to this point, and it rightly demands "accountability all the way to the top—no scapegoating of those on the frontline."

It is correct for the FBU to point the finger at successive deregulation by Tory and Labour government alike, but how has this been possible?

The cuts and deregulation that the FBU correctly criticises were not the product of subjective mistakes or misjudgements. They are the logical result of a system of production for profit over social need.

In 2002, when firefighters came out on strike for a wage rise, with the Blair government using the military as a scab force, the FBU worked might and main to call off the dispute. Then FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist remained loyal to Labour. The resulting Bain Review linked any wage rise to "modernisation" and "risk management" measures, further accelerating the deregulation process. This continued right up to the end of Labour's administration in 2010.

For all that the current FBU report dates the assault on fire regulations to the Thatcher government, the previous Labour administration under James Callaghan had also deployed the military to break an FBU wages strike. The TUC refused to support the firefighters, and the FBU voted to put the original pay offer with only minor amendments to its members in order to end the dispute.

In 2010, the union called off a strike by London firefighters threatened with sacking unless they agreed to new rosters and confronting a state-sanctioned scabbing operation. The betrayal was so abject the *Independent* headlined their coverage "First blood to the coalition."

While the FBU advocates national authorities and standards in fire safety, it has failed to unite disputes across regional fire services. Other fire services had already implemented the roster changes that triggered the 2010 London dispute. In 1998, the FBU isolated a strike against job cuts in Essex, despite national support from other firefighters and the fact that adjacent services were facing similar attacks.

The Grenfell Fire Forum demands:

- 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 multibillion-pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

The author recommends:

The political issues raised by Britain's firefighters strike [23 November 2002]

Britain: Blair declares class war against firefighters [29 November 2002]

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