

Labour's London mayor Sadiq Khan plans to demolish 8,000 council homes

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27 December 2018

Residents in working class housing estates are organising in opposition to the Labour Party mayor of London Sadiq Khan's proposed social cleansing "regeneration" schemes.

In February, Khan proposed "mandatory balloting schemes where any demolition is planned as a strict condition of his funding." Residents "would be at the heart" of decision-making, and there "must be no loss of social housing," claimed the mayor.

At a Mayor's Question Time in March, Khan promised he would not sign off on any new estate demolitions during a consulting period ending April 10. He concealed the fact that he had just hastily pushed through dozens of proposals allowing demolition and refurbishment by Labour councils and housing associations, all of whom would avoid his "progressive" new policy.

Khan's rush to allow funding for these schemes excluded from balloting ensure that 31,000 residents in at least 8,000 homes will face demolition on 118 estates in the coming decade, with other estimates placing the numbers even higher.

Answering criticisms, Khan cynically claimed he had kept his promise not to sign off on any new estate demolitions. But social cleansing continues under his administration. He said most decisions on the 34 estates had already been made before the summer of 2017 (he was elected in May 2016) and that 16 of the contracts signed after December 1 were for schemes already receiving City Hall funding.

Moreover, there are further restrictions on democratic accountability even on those developments not excluded from voting. Only schemes with Greater London Authority (GLA) funding would be eligible, and only where at least 150 new homes are planned to be built could residents have a say. Further exceptions and loopholes concern infrastructure, supported housing, and buildings that the landlord declares must be demolished

for safety reasons.

Khan's move to allow balloting before demolition only came following Jeremy Corbyn's suggestions at the 2017 Labour Party conference, and only after Corbyn had been placed under huge rank-and-file pressure to take a stand and demand Labour councils stop social cleansing policies. Corbyn is still not opposed to working class estates being demolished, with his "criticism" of Labour council privatisations' social cleansing framed as timidly as possible. A spokesman said Corbyn recognised the need for special funding and was at pains to reassure them that "Jeremy recognises councils have to be creative over these plans, and his speech wasn't intended as a direct criticism of them."

Opposition to the balloting proposal arose from Labour-controlled councils, including Haringey in north London, who were planning to carry out a £2 billion sell-off of public assets with the developer Lendlease. Haringey explained they opposed a ballot "because a yes/no vote would risk oversimplifying a complex issue." Due to growing public opposition that culminated in Blairite councillors being deselected, the Haringey privatisation was halted. However, with their Corbynite replacements being elected, the threat of social cleansing in other forms remains, as well as a further £14 million in austerity cuts.

Labour councils imposing social cleansing are on the same page as their corporate partners. A Freedom of Information request found a majority of housing associations providing views to City Hall opposed balloting, including the UK's largest, Clarion. They argued, "Ballots will slow down and increase the risk in what are already long drawn-out and uncertain regeneration programmes and are a disincentive to investing early on in the process."

Social cleansing of London and nationally continues. In June, Karen Buck, Labour MP for Westminster North, released analysis that shows sales of social housing to the

private sector more than tripling since 2001. Since 2012, more than 150,000 homes for social rent have disappeared nationally, 3,891 of them in 2016. Labour runs local authorities in most urban areas.

Housing associations in five London boroughs alone have collected £82.3 million from auctioning 153 properties in Westminster (Tory-controlled), Brent (Labour), Camden (Labour), Hammersmith and Fulham (Labour), and Kensington and Chelsea (Tory).

Ministry of Housing data shows a fall of over 100,000 London local authority homes since 2003. On the Heygate estate in Labour-run Southwark, the luxury development of Elephant Park replaced the 1,200 council homes that were destroyed between 2011 and 2014. Only 82 of the new 3,000 units were for social rent. Green Party London councillor and party co-leader Sian Berry said that analysis of the London Development database suggests another 7,600 homes would disappear on “regeneration” sites.

Many residents on affected estates, such as those in Haringey, Southwark and Lambeth, have been actively opposing rebuilding schemes for years. In March, the *News from Crystal Palace* website reported secret deals between Khan and Lambeth Council that excluded a demolition vote for residents of Cressingham Gardens, Fenwick, Knights Walk, South Lambeth and Westbury estates.

Nicola Curtis, chair of Central Hill residents and tenants’ association, posted, “[Labour-run] Lambeth are avoiding our calls for a ballot and have just awarded a £15m contract to the designers of the new estate and are showing by their actions they have no intention of balloting our residents.” Residents of Cressingham Gardens have been running their own poll showing a majority opposed to the scheme.

Labour-run Hackney Council has been in the process of demolishing and rebuilding the Woodbury Down estate since 1999, with developer Berkeley Homes and the Genesis Housing Association. Phases 2-8 of the project will cause a net loss of 645 socially rented units.

Architects for Social Housing spokesman Simon Elmer referred to the numbers as “grim reading. ... The possibilities of estate regeneration become radically reduced as soon as an estate is demolished. The cost of demolition, of compensation for residents, and of the construction of new-build dwellings is so high that at least 50 percent of the redevelopment will be properties for private sale at half a million pounds plus, with the resulting mass loss of homes for social rent from the

demolished estate.”

The Haringey Defend Council Housing group declared, “Tellingly, and terrifyingly, the Mayor wants decisions about ballots to be made by ‘investment partners’...it’s clear that Sadiq Khan still puts the interests of developer profit first.”

With more than 250,000 Londoners on housing waiting lists, the Khan ballot scandal and refusal of the authorities to bring anyone to justice for the deaths of 72 people in Grenfell Tower that occurred as a direct result of decades of social cleansing, deregulation and profiteering have galvanised residents.

Some 30 local and citywide groups are affiliated to the Radical Housing Network. The Grenfell Action Group is part of the network. In pursuit of safe, decent, affordable public housing, GAG fought the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council and its management company, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) imposing a “refurbishment” of Grenfell Tower. This saw the tower encased in highly flammable cladding that turned it into a death trap. A GAG blog post, just seven months before the fire, warned that only a “catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.”

Similar calls to Khan, a tried and trusted friend of the financial oligarchy, will also fall on deaf ears. As a mayoral candidate, he cemented ties with the main business groups from the Chamber of Commerce & Industry to the City of London Corporation. He promised the right-wing *Spectator* magazine he would be “dismantling the barriers to growth that exist and increasing productivity.” As for the accumulation of obscene wealth, he enthused, “I want to be the most pro-business mayor yet. ... I welcome the fact that we have got 140-plus billionaires in London. That’s a good thing. I welcome the fact that there are more than 400,000 millionaires. That’s a good thing.”



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