UK: Fire breaks out in tower block near Grenfell Tower

Steve James
24 August 2019

Fire broke out Friday morning on the 12th floor of Markland House, a 21-storey tower block in the Silchester Estate, in North Kensington, London.

The fire was first reported at 11:39 a.m., with smoke pouring from the flat and visible from all around the local area. Fortunately, firefighters had the blaze under control in less than two hours. No injuries were reported, although many residents were terrified by the experience.

The fire appears to have taken hold on the balcony of one of the flats and was therefore in close proximity to the building's external surfaces. Images taken after the fire was extinguished show brickwork covered in soot around and immediately above the damaged flat. The fire, however, did not spread, as brick and concrete does not burn at such temperatures. Even the windows of the flat above appear to be intact.

Markland House stands only a few hundred yards from another high rise, Grenfell Tower in the working-class area. Twitter user Georgie Prodromou, a Special Correspondent for an entertainment media network, uploaded footage showing just how close to each other the blocks are.

The neighbouring blocks were built within a year of each other. Although of different designs, both stood uneventfully for decades, as host to occasional domestic fires.

Yet on June 14, 2017, a small internal kitchen fire in a fourth floor flat in Grenfell Tower, developed within minutes into a catastrophic fire which killed 72 people and blazed for days. Over two years later, Grenfell Tower remains covered in plastic sheeting shrouding the hideously charred and blackened building in which flames burned so fiercely that some victims' bodies were fused together.

The external walls of Markland House remain as they were built. But fatefully, Grenfell Tower was subject to a criminally reckless "refurbishment" programme, under the control of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which included covering the building's external surface with highly flammable cladding and insulation. As a consequence, when Grenfell's fire shattered a window and reached the building's outside walls, the tower was transformed into a blazing death trap with an inferno rapidly destroying the entire structure. No person or organisation has yet been charged by the police with playing any role in the deaths of so many people and it's set to be years before the government's cover-up inquiry publishes any findings.

The Grenfell blaze exposed the fact that "compartmentation" as the basis of fire safety in tower blocks was largely discarded by the authorities in recent decades.

Britain's tower blocks, particularly those built as social housing in the 1960s and 1970s, rely on the principle that a fire could not spread from one flat to its neighbour, or from one floor to another, because of the non-flammable walls and lack of vectors through which fire could travel. This was the basis of the "stay put" advice given to hundreds of terrified Grenfell residents by the London Fire Brigade, even as the fire rapidly consumed the external walls of their building before shattering windows and entering ever higher floors.

By installing dangerous cladding, as well as introducing new cabling and pipework around and between floors without adequate fire stopping, an unknown numbers of lucrative refurbishment schemes have transformed basic but relatively safe tower blocks into firetraps.

The dangers were known long before Grenfell. In 2009, a fire at Lakanal House in south London killed

© World Socialist Web Site

six people and injured many more when it spread internally and externally across a number of flats and floors in a refurbished 14-storey block. That nothing was done—despite clear recommendations being made about not using dangerous cladding—reflected the systematic erosion of building regulations and fire safety oversight under successive Labour and Conservative administrations. They did this to satisfy the insatiable demands of the building companies and banks for greater profits, at the expense of elementary safety.

The same profit interests lie behind the fact that that no full and comprehensive figure has been reached regarding the number of high-rise flats, student accommodation blocks, offices, hospitals and public buildings that remain at serious risk of fire spreading in a manner similar to the Grenfell and Lakanal fires. Only a handful of towers with the aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding used in Grenfell have been stripped. Many more blocks covered in such cladding remain protected only by fire wardens and the most elementary fire safety measures such as improved fire door checks. There are no plans to comprehensively upgrade social housing blocks to include basic sprinkler systems.

Even low-rise blocks are dangerous. Earlier this year, a week after the second anniversary of Grenfell, 20 flats across six floors were destroyed or damaged in De Pass Gardens in Barking, Essex. Wooden external balconies in a complex of private and social housing flats caught fire after a domestic barbecue set fire to one balcony.

Yesterday's fire exposed another concern. The fire was attended by as many as 70 firefighters from 10 fire stations around London and rapidly dealt with. Pictures of the scene however, showed fire hoses spraying water many floors below the burning balcony to no apparent purpose. The Grenfell disaster revealed that fire services in London, drastically reduced by austerity measures over recent years, had no aerial ladder capable of reaching beyond the 10th floor of the burning building. Although longer ladders have subsequently been purchased, none appears to have been deployed yesterday.

One Markham House resident, Billy Hunt, was asleep when the fire started after doing a night shift. He said he was not woken up by any alarm in the building but by the smell. Hunt said as he rushed out of the building he knocked on neighbours' doors to alert them. Stating that he did not feel safe living in a tower block, due to the lack of a central alarm system, "They should be going off all over the place, especially after Grenfell." He told the media that he had been informed that the fire brigades' hose had only reached the fifth floor, describing it as "ridiculous".

Another resident, Samantha Findley, summed up the response of many to the Grenfell fire. Refusing to wait for any advice from the authorities, after smelling what she understood was burning plastic in the tower, Samantha immediately fled—not waiting to be told to remain in her flat. "I smelled it. So I thought 'let me get out, I'm out.' I grabbed my keys, my phone. I'm out. I'm not seeing where it is or anything. I'm out."

The BBC reported the comments of Grenfell Tower survivor Miguel Alves, who is among hundreds of people still demanding justice for the atrocity. He was in the area when he "saw fire engines and police," reported the broadcaster. He said, "I feel shocked because it's only 200 metres or 300 or 400 metres anyway from Grenfell Tower. It's on the same area. It's difficult to believe something happened again on the same area."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site