

Socialist Equality Party campaigns at Chalcot Estate in North London

Britain's cladding crisis

Our reporters
28 November 2019

Members of the Socialist Equality Party visited the Chalcot housing estate in North London and spoke with residents to discuss desperately needed fire safety repairs to five tower blocks, as well as the first phase of the Grenfell Fire Inquiry.

Among those campaigning was Socialist Equality Party general election candidate Thomas Scripps, who is standing in the Holborn and St. Pancras constituency—which is adjacent to Chalcot.

Most of the Chalcot Estate's 717 homes, roughly 3,000 people, were chaotically evacuated in June 2017 after fire experts told the local Labour Party-run Camden council they could not guarantee the tower blocks they lived in were safe.

The estate was refurbished between 2006 and 2009 by the same firm, Rydon, which carried out the criminally unsafe cladding of Grenfell Tower in flammable material in 2015-2016. Rydon was subcontracted to carry out the work as part of a £150 million private finance initiative (PFI) agreed between Camden Council and Partners for Improvement Camden (PFIC).

Following the evacuation, Camden removed the unsafe cladding from the Chalcot tower blocks and canceled payments to PFIC. PFIC declared insolvency and went into liquidation in 2018. Three of its directors—Vikki Everett, Karen Hill and Martin Smith—are directors of Partners for Improvement Islington, with whom Rydon is also involved.

Partners are involved in two PFI deals with Islington Council, which saw the council pay out over £42 million in 2017 for the management of 6,440 council homes—according to the *Islington Gazette*. The deals are due to expire in 2022 and 2033.

More than two years after safety concerns were first raised, Camden have begun work on refitting the Chalcot towers. The council have agreed a contract with the Wates Group to carry out renovations over a further two years—installing new A1 (the highest) fire safety rated cladding—at an estimated cost of £89.69 million.

Since £16 million has already been spent on the removal of the original cladding and Camden secured only £80.6 million from the government's pitiful £400 million national cladding remediation fund, the council will have to commit an additional £26.5 million from its own resources. This is on top of £12.5 million spent on evacuating the Chalcot Estate, providing temporary accommodation and securing the site, £25 million on fire safety works across the borough and £19 million on fire risk assessments on council-owned properties.

Residents have been highly critical of the council's renovation plans, which include the complete replacement of the towers' windows—meaning radiators and piping inside flats will have to be moved. Combustible materials were found by fire safety inspectors in the curtain walls containing the current window fittings. Camden have not answered questions about whether occupants will be compensated for new flooring, wallpaper and curtains. There are also no provisions being made for alternative accommodation whilst these highly disruptive building works take place.

Speaking to the campaign team, **David** described the night of the evacuation as “very hectic. I was in Bray [Tower] at a friend's house and someone messaged me asking ‘Are you being evacuated?’ Then from the window I could see people in high-vis jackets. I called my parents to ask what was going on... It was a very chaotic process.”

Regarding the continued availability nationally of flammable cladding for construction and its remaining in place on many residential buildings, Dan said, “It's ridiculous. They don't seem to be doing anything about it.” In response to phase one of the Grenfell Inquiry, which made numerous criticisms of the London Fire Brigade, but not the political and corporate criminals responsible for turning Grenfell Tower into a death trap, David continued, “I think the root of the problem is what should be focused on. You can't attack the fire brigade. Safety should be the

number one priority when developing any flat—the fact that it isn't is just wrong.”

“They need to make sure that people are safe,” said one resident, “For me, it's incredible that people can still be placed in situations like this. It needs to be fixed and it needs to be fixed fast. Even here, sometimes I find myself thinking, ‘Am I safe?’”

John explained the distress caused by the current renovation work: “Camden [council] haven't been at all sympathetic. The evacuation of the flats was carried out without the least bit of forethought. They weren't the least bit concerned about how the tenants fared. Now the continuing pressure they're putting on tenants to agree to new windows is causing great distress.

“My niece, who is a tenant, has been required to pay several thousand pounds for new heating, because she bought her flat. This heating is now to be removed and new put in. She's in a constant state of stress because she's being required to continue to pay money, notwithstanding that the heating that has been supplied is insufficient.

“And I think, generally speaking, the whole way Camden have approached it has not been sympathetic. And the worst of it is, one assumes that Camden being a Labour council would be more sympathetic, but unfortunately they're not.”

Another resident told WSWS reporters, “You have people who are ill—my husband for one—and they are taking the whole windows out, leaving people in the flats while this takes place. It's very stressful. When they first evacuated us, they put us all in hotels. Why aren't they going to do that now when you're going to have very disruptive building work?”

Asked about the fact that there are still over 400 potentially unsafe tower blocks nationally, **Ida** replied, “I think by now the government should have done so much better than that. The councils, housing associations, private landlords, all of them should have taken responsibility and done something. Private landlords are the worst, I think.”

On the Grenfell Inquiry, she said, “You can't blame the fire service. They came in a crisis—the point is that there shouldn't have been a crisis in the first place. That's the way I see it.”

Echoing these thoughts, another resident explained, “It all comes back to the bonfire of regulations over the past few years. It's terrible what they've done with the Inquiry, blaming the fire brigade. It's not just about the cladding, it's about cuts to the fire service. We had a fire station just opposite here that was closed down.” This was Belsize Fire Station, located just 500 meters from the Chalcot estate, and closed in 2014. This measure was one of the cuts imposed by the present prime minister, and then London mayor, Boris Johnson, which included the shutting of 10 fire stations.

The situation at Chalcot demonstrates the socially destructive impact of decades of Labour and Tory attacks on building and fire safety regulations, and the social consequences of the ongoing cover-up of these issues carried out by the Grenfell Public Inquiry (supported by both parties). The SEP established the Grenfell FireForum in order to establish the truth about the Grenfell fire and the Inquiry's whitewash.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that quality public housing is a social right. All public buildings must be stripped of their dangerous cladding immediately and homes made safe. This requires a multi-billion pound programme of public repair works, which must be funded from the profits of cost-cutting property developers and the rest of the super-rich. The wealth of this parasitic layer must be expropriated to build high quality public housing, schools, hospitals and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century.

Speaking to WSWS readers, Scripps said, “Nationally, there are well over 300 tower blocks that still have the same type of cladding as used in Grenfell. There are over 100 using the similarly dangerous HPL cladding [high-pressure laminate]. The Grenfell Tower inquiry has been a whitewash, designed to protect those responsible for the devastating fire that occurred.” He added that “working class communities across the country should “take matters into their own hands” to ensure that the funding is made available “from the private property developers to pay for the vital refurbishments to make these flats safe to live in”.

The author also recommends:

UK: Camden residents speak of ill treatment during tower block evacuation

[26 June 2017]

Inquiry issues cover-up report on Grenfell Tower fire disaster

[31 October 2019]



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