

Fire Brigades Union study exposes decades of deregulation and cost-cutting that led to Grenfell Tower inferno—Part 2

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This is the second and concluding part of a two - part series. The first part was published here .

A major strength of the FBU's research is its documenting of the role of the last Labour government in decimating health and safety regulations in relation to the fire service.

Tony Blair's New Labour, which came to power in 1997 and remained in government until 2010 under Blair and then Gordon Brown, played a particularly nefarious role in the systematic undermining of fire safety services and building regulations. Opposed to anything that would impinge on the deregulatory drive and lust for profit of the last two decades, Blair, Brown and their cohorts—Thatcherites to the bones—deepened the offensive. This included making significant cuts to firefighters' jobs, leaving the service massively underfunded and unprepared.

In 2004, the Labour government replaced the Fire Services Act 1947 with the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. This legislation abolished national standards of fire cover, allowing local services to set attendance targets (time taken by the fire service to reach a fire) for their own areas. It abolished the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC), which had been condemned by Labour fire minister Phil Hope as “cumbersome, complex and unable to deliver meaningful change.”

The FBU describes the “significant legislative failure” posed by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. According to the union, the Labour government ignored many warnings from a range of experts when it introduced the Order, scrapping in particular the fire certification process, which had given fire authorities considerable leverage to bring about improved safety standards.

Warnings about the impact of scrapping national

standards and the CFBAC, and the decentralising “hands-off” approach of the Labour government, as well as about the consequences of continued central funding cuts, were all ignored by Labour, the FBU explains.

“Overall,” states the FBU, “the New Labour government continued with the deregulation agenda begun by Thatcher, weakening the fire safety regime for high-rise residential buildings and other housing. It scrapped the CFBAC, the authoritative statutory stakeholder body and replaced it with the weak and ineffective Practitioners’ Forum, which was itself scrapped after the 2010 general election.”

The report continues: “The government also failed to provide the resources fire authorities needed to enforce fire safety standards effectively. In particular, it made significant cuts to wholetime firefighter jobs, reducing the number of personnel available for fire safety inspections.”

The widespread deregulation under Blair and Brown continued and intensified as Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron came to power in 2010 in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Cameron pledged to “kill off” the “excessive health and safety … albatross around the neck of British businesses.” Cameron announced a “Red Tape Challenge,” which declared that government departments must find savings worth double the cost of any new regulations on business.

A speech by fire minister Bob Neill in June 2011 summed up this sociopathic agenda: “Over the years,” he stated, “regulations—and the inspections and bureaucracy that go with them—have piled up and up. This has hurt business, imposing real burdens and doing real damage to our economy.”

Neill continued: “Reducing the number of rules and regulations is therefore absolutely central to the Coalition Government’s vision for Britain, removing barriers to

economic growth and increasing individual freedoms. We have given a clear commitment that where regulation cannot be justified, we will remove it.”

Not content with merely gutting safety regulations, the Tories launched an all-out assault on the fire service, with then London Mayor and now Prime Minister Boris Johnson closing 10 fire stations across London and axing hundreds of firefighters’ jobs. Peckham fire station, very close to Lakanal House in south London, where six people died in a fire in July 2009, was downgraded to a one-pump station.

The FBU points out that this led to a situation in which the London Fire Brigade was forced to reduce the total number of staff by 23 percent over a decade.

The report devotes a considerable section to the aftermath of the Lakanal House fire. The FBU details how the coroner at the inquest into the fire, which had many similarities to events at Grenfell Tower just eight years later, made a number of fire-safety recommendations. All but one were ignored by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the government body overseeing fire safety.

The information provided in the FBU’s report serves as an important corrective to the narrative of the ruling elite and its media mouthpieces that the main responsibility for the mass deaths from the Grenfell Tower fire lies with the LFB. It shows that the preconditions for the devastating inferno had already been created decades ago, making the job of firefighters attending the inferno at Grenfell almost impossible.

It is correct for the FBU to point the finger at deregulation and cuts carried out by successive Tory and Labour governments alike, but these policies were not the product of subjective mistakes or misjudgments. They are the logical result of a system, capitalism, in which all production and political decisions are geared towards the accumulation of profit over social need.

The unions, including the FBU have played a central role in enabling this offensive to be imposed.

As the WSWS noted, when firefighters came out on strike for a wage rise in 2002—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 time in office in 2010.

The unions continued their sellout with the Tories and Lib Dems coming to power in 2010. That year the FBU, confronting a state-sanctioned scabbing operation, called off a strike by London firefighters who faced the sack unless they agreed to new rosters. 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.

While the FBU has made a number of important points about the years of privatisations and deregulation that led to Grenfell, it continues to cooperate with and sow illusions in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. This endorsement, along with the backing of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, has lent an entirely false legitimacy to the inquiry, politically disarming survivors, the families of victims and the entire working class and exposing the union’s own members to the threat of scapegoating and victimisation.

The SEP and Grenfell Fire Forum urge workers and youth to end cooperation with the Inquiry and demand the immediate arrest and prosecution of all the political and corporate criminals responsible, many of whom have been exposed in the FBU report, and an immediate end to the scapegoating of firefighters.

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 high quality public housing, schools, hospitals, and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!



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