

Official inquiry cover-up of Grenfell Fire begins “second phase”

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Newly appointed panel member Benita Mehra was forced to resign Saturday from the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire after being exposed as having financial links to US cladding manufacturer Arconic.

Mehra was forced to step down after having been hand-picked by the Conservative government, as the bereaved and survivors of the fire threatened to boycott the second phase of the inquiry, which begins today. The decision to appoint her was described as a “slap in the face” by the survivors and bereaved group Grenfell United.

Mehra chaired the Women’s Engineering Society (WES) from 2015 to 2017, which received a charitable donation of £71,000 from the Arconic Foundation for an apprentice conference in 2017, three months after the Grenfell fire. The sum was the largest grant paid out by the Arconic Foundation that year. The *Guardian* reported that Mehra personally helped draft the application for funds. She remains a trustee of the WES.

US conglomerate Arconic supplied the deadly cladding that led a small kitchen fire in a Grenfell flat to become a raging inferno. The cladding consisted of thin outer aluminium panels filled with flammable insulation, which gives off noxious gases when ignited. The core was manufactured by the firm Celotex.

The other company implicated in the blaze was Rydon, the construction company contracted by Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council to oversee the “refurbishment” of the tower in 2015-16. That supposed upgrade transformed the tower block into a death trap.

In its initial findings published last October, the inquiry identified the main cause of the rapid spread of the fire and resulting massive loss of life to be the flammable cladding that encased Grenfell Tower. The first report stated: “The principal reason why the flames spread so rapidly up, down and around the building was the presence of the aluminium composite material (ACM) rainscreen panels with polyethylene cores, which acted as a source of fuel.”

Inquiry chair Sir Martin Moore-Bick said the panels “melted and acted as a source of fuel for the growing fire.”

Arconic’s legal representatives are due to give their opening statement to the inquiry tomorrow. The second phase will examine “the decisions which led to the installation of a highly combustible cladding system on a high-rise residential building and the wider background against which they were taken.”

Concurrent with the inquiry is a lawsuit alleging wrongful death lodged in the US by the families of 69 victims of the fire and 177 survivors against Arconic and Celotex. The suit is also against Saint-Gobain, the French parent company of Celotex, and white goods maker Whirlpool. It was a refrigerator fire that started the inferno.

The plaintiffs’ lawyers base their argument on the premise that Arconic sold the cladding “knowing it was flammable, it could spread fire and it could and would kill.”

Two-and-a-half years since the horrific fire, no one has been arrested, let alone charged, in the deaths of 72 men, women and children on June 14, 2017. Moreover, work to remove flammable cladding on 315 other residential tower blocks in the UK has still not begun.

It was just before Christmas that the Conservative government quietly announced a change in the composition of the panel to preside over phase two of the inquiry. Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote to Moore-Bick seeking endorsement of Mehra, described as an “experienced chartered engineer,” to replace Professor Nabeel Hamdi. Mehra would sit alongside architect Thouria Istephan, joining Moore-Bick on the three-person panel.

The survivors had demanded from the outset that a panel be appointed to assist Moore-Bick, and Professor Hamdi was their preferred choice.

In his letter, Johnson assured Moore-Bick that in accordance with the Inquiries Act 2005, “I must not appoint a person to the panel who has a direct interest in the matters to which the inquiry relates or a person who has a close association with an interested party unless those links could not be reasonably regarded as affecting the impartiality of the inquiry panel.

“Ms. Mehra has confirmed she is not aware of any conflict

of interest and Cabinet Office officials have also undertaken due diligence which has not identified any concerns.”

Moore-Bick accepted the appointment, with an inquiry spokesman saying it was “confident that Benita Mehra’s former presidency of the Women’s Engineering Society does not affect her impartiality as a panel member.”

Unhappy with the government’s “lack of explanation” for Professor Hamdi’s replacement, it was survivors and bereaved group Grenfell United that uncovered Mehra’s links with Arconic. Karim Mussilhy, the vice-chairman of Grenfell United, told the *Guardian*, “Her society has been supported by Arconic. She will look at it from the perspective of Arconic doing good things for the industry, that they are a great organisation. Her perspective will be affected.

“How can she sit next to Sir Martin Moore-Bick when Arconic will be on the stand and is one of the organisations we need answers from in terms of what caused the deaths of our loved ones?”

Emma Dent-Coad, the former Labour Party MP for Kensington, tweeted that the appointment was “[t]he final nail in the coffin of justice for Grenfell.”

Labour’s press team meekly requested that “Boris Johnson should reverse his thoughtless decision to appoint Benita Mehra to the Grenfell Inquiry and apologise.”

Fire Brigades Union leader Matt Wrack tweeted, “Another disgrace. We warned from the start that a public inquiry is no guarantee whatsoever of justice. Boris Johnson seems determined to prove us right.”

The fact is that Labour under Jeremy Corbyn and the Fire Brigades Union gave the inquiry their full backing—with a few caveats—as a vehicle for justice for those whose lives were devastated by the fire. The FBU now feels it must step up criticisms of the inquiry, but at no stage, despite threats to do so, has it ever called for a withdrawal of support. It therefore shares full responsibility for the outcome.

The first phase of the inquiry, limited to considering the events on the night of the fire, concluded by deflecting culpability for the Grenfell deaths away from the companies and the central and local governments and onto deficiencies in the way the London Fire Brigade operated.

This also covers up for the role of successive Labour and Conservative governments over decades in deregulating the building industry to maximise profits. No mention was made of the massive cuts to the London fire service, including the closure of 10 fire stations forced through by Johnson when he was mayor of London, and his dismissive attitude to firefighters’ concerns, telling them to “Get stuffed.”

The appointment of Mehra only exposed the whitewash and cover-up of the crimes of the guilty parties that marked phase one of the inquiry and will continue throughout phase

two.

The survivors and bereaved families face years of further trauma. The findings of phase two of the inquiry are not expected even to be published until 2023. The Metropolitan Police have already met relatives and survivors to inform them that the police investigation into the fire, running alongside the inquiry, will not lead to any charges—if any are ever brought—until the second phase inquiry findings are published and a subsequent police study of its conclusions has taken place. It is suggested that this could take until 2025—fully eight years after the fire!

During the second phase, 200,000 documents are being prepared for analysis, 10 times the number dealt with in phase one. There will be eight “modules,” including on the refurbishment of the tower, how cladding products are tested, and residents’ complaints to the Council before the fire. Twenty-one companies and 600 individuals will have “core participant” status.

Mehra’s removal from the panel does not alter the fact that the fundamental purpose of the inquiry is to protect, rather than punish, the guilty. The Socialist Equality Party and the Grenfell Fire Forum urge that all further cooperation with the inquiry end and that those fighting for justice demand the immediate arrest and trial of all those responsible for the social murder that occurred at Grenfell.

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page



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