Grenfell Tower contractor Rydon admits profiteering by using flammable cladding

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Rydon, the main contractor overseeing the refurbishment at the Grenfell Tower, profited from a deliberate decision to change the proposed cladding to a cheaper and more combustible type.

The criminal decision to use flammable cladding was the main factor in turning the tower block into a death trap, when a small fire in a fourth floor flat on the night of June 14, 2017 engulfed the building, claiming the lives of 72 people.

At the beginning of the refurbishment project talks in early 2014, cost cutting was the primary aim for every organisation involved.

This week the inquiry into the Grenfell inferno was told that Kensington and Chelsea Tenants' Management Organisation (KCTMO), which managed the tower on behalf of the local Conservative council, demanded savings of more than £800,000 from the refurbishment project, originally estimated at £10 million. It told Rydon that it was in pole position to be awarded the contract, but needed to find savings.

Rydon knew that by using the cheaper, more flammable Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding, instead of the zinc-based cladding initially proposed, the cost saving would be £419,627. This figure was concealed from KCTMO, Simon Lawrence, Rydon's contract manager, explained, so that Rydon could take "some of the savings for themselves."

Internal Rydon emails revealed that an employee, Frank Smith, had underpriced its total estimate of the refurbishment costs by £212,000. As a result Rydon was looking for ways to "compensate" for the error.

Speaking on behalf of Rydon at the inquiry, Lawrence, who was involved in the Grenfell project between June 2014 and October 2015, said he was aware of Rydon's cost saving operation. Lawrence was asked by Richard Millett QC, counsel to the inquiry, "Was the plan in Rydon to keep the TMO in the dark about the real extent of the savings on the ACM panels and then pocket the difference to make up for Frank Smith's £210,000 estimating error?"

Lawrence replied, "That could be the reason for it."

Millett asked, "Why was it not Rydon's responsibility to alert the TMO that Harley had advised that far greater savings could be achieved than you were letting on?"

Lawrence replied, "It probably went into risk or into additional profit."

Harley Facades was the main contractor of Rydon's and applied the flammable cladding to Grenfell Tower. Records show that the following month Harley was preparing talks over the project with the architects Studio E. At that stage, Lawrence asked a Harley employee, Mark Harris, to ensure "anything financial stays between ourselves."

Millett asked Lawrence in relation to his advice to Harris, "Was it because you were concerned the TMO found out you were pocketing the savings?" Lawrence replied, "No."

Lawrence was presented with further evidence, from May 2014, of Rydon concealing information from the TMO. Millet asked him, "Is it fair to say that you, again, were materially understating to the TMO here the extent of the savings on ACM panels?" Lawrence replied, "Yes. Yes."

An email from Lawrence to Rydon colleagues was shown to the hearing. In it Lawrence said, "I have a gut feeling that KCTMO may go for the cassette-fix option on the cladding due to perceived planning risk.

"This gives us a benefit of £126,259 rather than the preferred face-fix option which will generate £200,798 benefit. … I'm giving it my hardest sales pitch as we speak."

On Tuesday, as Rydon continued its testimony, the inquiry heard that on November 12 2014, Claire Williams, an employee of the KCTMO, sent an email to

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Lawrence requesting clarification on whether the new cladding being proposed would resist a fire. Williams wrote, “I am just writing to get clarification on the fire retardance of the new cladding—I just had a ‘Lacknall [sic] moment’.”

This was a reference to a 2009 fire in the high-rise Lakanal House residential block in southeast London, that also had flammable cladding, which killed six people. Asked if he knew what the Lakanal reference meant, Lawrence replied, “I knew that. I had heard that there was a fire at Lakanal some years before, but I didn’t know the specific details. So I knew it was relating to fire.”

Neither Lawrence nor any other Rydon employee responded to the email. Lawyers for the bereaved and survivors said of the episode, “This was perhaps the last chance to avert disaster … and it was not taken.”

Tony Pearson of materials testing firm Exova, following up on the three-day testimony of the firm’s senior fire engineer last week, recalled that council building control officers had put pressure on the architects to provide adequate fire safety.

A March 2015 email from John Hoban, senior building surveyor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC), claimed the new wall structure needed firestopping to prevent flames developing between floors for two hours. Studio E architect Neil Crawford thought this superfluous, citing the existence of cavity barriers: “The subject of fire barriers is raising a lot of concern on site not least because of program and cost. We are all miffed as to why this detail is not a cavity barrier.”

Observing that evacuation plans might not meet the latest regulations, one engineer emailed a colleague, “Let’s hope [the building control officer] doesn’t pick up on it.”

Recounting how engineers submitted what they called a “debatable” justification for designing only a single staircase to evacuate flats on lower floors, Pearson claimed it represented “a first attempt at justification, and if building control comes back and says we are not happy with it, then we will revisit it. … RBKC building control department had a bit of a reputation as hard to convince to accept anything non-standard.”

Pearson said he knew that proper cavity barriers prevented the rapid spread of fire. On March 31, 2015 he told boss Terry Ashton, “If significant flames are ejected from the windows, this would lead to failure of the cladding system, with the external surface falling away and exposing the cavity.”

Exova signed off on all three versions of the project fire safety plans, continuously asserting, “the proposed changes will have no adverse effect on the building in relation to eternal fire spread.”

Pearson, who was meant to check Ashton’s work, admitted he was “completely ignorant of the fact that the works included overcladding.” On one occasion he spent a hurried half hour making changes to Ashton’s plans, only to discover that Ashton had already submitted them. He said he “took it on trust” that Ashton knew what he was doing.

Everything emerging from the Grenfell Inquiry confirms that the longer it continues the more it militates against any possibility of securing justice. As the second phase of the inquiry got underway, the main companies involved refused to testify unless they were given assurances they would be legally protected from self-incrimination.

At the start of June, legal immunity was granted, with Attorney General Suella Braverman issuing an undertaking that any statements given to the inquiry by “legal persons” cannot be used as evidence against them in a future prosecution. This followed an earlier undertaking granting the same legal protection to “natural persons.”

While the bereaved and survivors of Grenfell want to know what transpired to lead to the deaths of the 72, and the ruin of so many lives, everyone now knows what happened—with much of the criminality of the firms involved revealed in the days following the tragedy.

With Rydon’s testimony, the main guilty party involved is now revealing the extent of the criminality that turned Grenfell into a death trap. Under the terms of the immunity deal agreed with the government, the more Rydon reveals during the inquiry the stronger its case becomes against any future prosecutions! To achieve justice, the Socialist Equality Party repeats its call for an end to all collaboration with the judicial fraud of the inquiry. The demand must go out for those responsible for social murder to be arrested, charged and put on trial.

For further information, visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page.

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