

Grenfell Tower refurbishment company supplied cladding that could burn the “entire height” of a tower block

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Last week, counselors representing the bereaved and survivors of London’s 2017 Grenfell fire presented a range of internal documents to the inquiry from Arconic, Celotex and Kingspan, illustrating a history of selling products they knew for years to be “dangerous to life.”

In a devastating indictment of the profiteering and disregard for residents safety and lives by the corporations involved, Adrian Williamson QC and Sam Stein QC provided emails and slide shows documenting the manufacture, marketing and testing of materials within what they termed was a “toxic and incestuous culture.” Such “widespread and persistent wrongdoing,” they claimed, rendered the companies “little more than crooks and killers.”

A 2013 email from Deborah French, Arconic’s UK sales representative, concluded her reference to ACM (aluminium composite material) panels, noting, “using PE [polyethylene] is like a chimney which transports the fire... in the shortest times.” Claude Wehrle, another Arconic senior executive was aware of a high-rise facade fire in Bucharest involving PE aluminium composite (ACM) panels. He commented on “how dangerous PE can be when it comes to architecture.” In an October 2015 email, Wehrle wrote, “In PE, the fire would have spread over the entire height of the tower.” Another Arconic senior executive said their products’ fire performance was “something that we have to keep VERY CONFIDENTIAL!!!!”

In a 2014 presentation, Celotex said it could market their plastic foam insulation even if it were combustible because “nobody understood the test requirements.” When the company began to market its product in the UK the previous year, the project manager asked, “Do we take the view that our product shouldn’t realistically be used behind most cladding panels because in the event of a fire it would burn?” However, it was noted that rival manufacturer Kingspan had been successful selling its dangerous products by “saying very little.”

The second module of the Grenfell fire Inquiry’s Phase 2

is focusing on the actions of the cladding companies.

Prior to the latest testimony, the inquiry heard more from the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) that ran the tower on behalf of the Conservative run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC).

Former director of assets Peter Maddison was asked by Richard Millett QC about an online meeting with subcontractor Rydon over cost cutting before the company were awarded the contract the following day--an action they had been told through legal advice had breached European regulations.

RBKC came under attack from expert witness Beryl Menzies, a building control officer with decades of experience. She claimed the refurbishment plan originally drawn up for the building control team, including for the cladding of the tower, was inadequate and should have been scrapped before construction. It also did not observe that some of the project team’s information was both contradictory and out of date. But above all, no one had sought details about the external wall or cladding: “Failure to ask detailed information about the cladding system was a fundamental failing.”

The module concluded with expert witness Dr. Barbara Lane criticizing materials testing firm Exova’s fire reports. Billing showed the company’s initial check lasted just two hours, and that the complete report was drawn up in only three and a half days. Lane claimed the timeframe was “wholly insufficient for the checks, which should have taken two people a full day, while the report needed weeks for adequate preparation.

When the second module began on November 2, Stephanie Barwise QC referred to the “sinister” actions of three companies: cladding manufacturer Arconic and insulation makers Celotex and Kingspan.

Arconic, whose Reynobond aluminium cladding was found to be the principal cause for the fire’s spread, had

tried to reverse its fortunes after a poor performance in a 2005 French “single burning item” test. In a 2006 meeting at Luton, they decided they needed a British Board of Agreement (BBA) certificate. They succeeded in this by what Barwise termed a “false premise.” Instead of testing the pure polyethylene-cored panel that ended up on Grenfell tower, a fire-retardant version was used instead. The firm never mentioned the French test, and the BBA certificate claimed that both versions of the panel “may be regarded” as having a “Class 0” surface. This was supposedly the highest fire-retardant level.

The majority of the tower’s insulation was provided by Celotex, which set out to compete with rival Kingspan by passing test and certification. This was done in May 2014 but was withdrawn in 2018 after it was found that fire-resistant magnesium oxide boards had been utilised to fortify areas of the testing rig where the temperature monitors were placed. Nonetheless, they managed to obtain a report from the Building Research Establishment (BRE), which misled the public by concealing the distortion of the test.

A relatively small amount of Kingspan’s K15 Kooltherm insulation was used on Grenfell, but its history of testing was even more abysmal. Although it had passed a May 2005 large-scale BRE fire test, the result became irrelevant the following year because of a substantial change in K15 technology. This rendered it a new product, and when tested again in 2017, one Kingspan observer described the result as a “raging inferno”--finding “the K15 product was fully involved in the fire and continued to burn after the heat source was extinguished.”

Nevertheless, the 2005 test continued to be cited in its highly successful marketing that has seen the product become the leading insulation and is presently on thousands of buildings across the country. Only last weekend did Kingspan finally stop the advertising, admitting that what was tested did not match what it had been selling since 2006. Internal communications showed employees describing their product’s Class 0 certificates as “a complete spin” and “a bit of a cheater.” According to Barwise, “Kingspan’s unrepentant arrogance is truly chilling.”

Barwise recounted the company’s role in influencing regulatory bodies. She noted that guidance from the Building Control Alliance in 2014 believed it was allowable to use combustible cladding combinations on high-rises without a test if they were signed off as part of a “desktop study” by a fire professional. By 2016, the National House Building Council opined that some combinations did not even require the “desktop study.” Barwise concluded, “It is now clear that Kingspan was actively involved in the drafting of both pieces of guidance, as internal email exchanges show. Kingspan was, in its own words, ‘slowly educating the

NHBC.’”

Following the revelations about the knowledge of the main companies about how dangerous their cladding products were, Dr. Lane reappeared last Tuesday to question the close relationship between companies and regulatory authorities. Before the Grenfell fire, there were two tests: the BS 8414 allowing for combustible materials to be used legally if they passed a trial using a 9m replica of the system, and Class 0 tests for specific products like cladding panels. She criticized both, saying the first relied upon data from the first 15 minutes which “may be before peak temperatures are measured for relevant cladding materials.” The definition of Class 0, she claimed, had degraded over time.

She observed that, “Extensive work seems to have gone into defining these tests.” She pointed out that the chair of the committee for fire safety in buildings at the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) is Dr. Debbie Smith, managing director of the British Research Establishment (BRE). The BRE, which conducts the majority of the country’s BS 8414 tests, took commercial fees from clients, especially insulation manufacturers. The CEN subcommittee for reaction to fire is convened by Roy Weghorst, Kingspan’s head of regulatory affairs for fire.

Masses of evidence was already in the public domain about the corporate criminality that led to the Grenfell fire. The inquiry has only just got around to making public an Arconic executive declaring, nearly two years before the Grenfell inferno, that a PE cladding “fire would have spread over the entire height” of a tower but this and every other bit of incriminating evidence has been in the hands of the police for years now.

The Inquiry is nothing more than a grotesque parade in which company executives can reveal the extent of their criminality knowing they have been granted immunity from prosecution for whatever they reveal.

All fighting for justice for the victims of social murder at Grenfell must demand an end to the inquiry and the immediate arrest and prosecution of those responsible in corporate and political circles.

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