

The Grenfell fire and fight for justice five years on

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Five years ago, on June 14, 2017, the Grenfell Tower inferno took the lives of 72 men, women and children, including two who later died in hospital. More than 70 others were injured and 233 people barely escaped with their lives, suffering the most traumatic experiences as many of their loved one perished. Located in the heart of London, it was the worst UK residential fire since World War II.

They died after a small fire broke out in a kitchen in one of the fourth-floor flats in the early hours of the morning. Within minutes the fire spread to engulf the entire 24-storey concrete and steel structure, fuelled by highly combustible ACM (aluminium composite material) cladding. The cheap material was stuck to the building's exterior as part of a "refurbishment" determined by cost-cutting.

So much death and destruction occurred because the tower, built in the 1970s and previously a safe building, had been turned into a death trap by the profiteering of corporations operating in an environment where they could get away with anything due to the deregulation and privatisation policies imposed by successive Conservative and Labour governments.

Grenfell is seared into the consciousness of the working class in Britain and internationally. In a statement less than two weeks after the fire, on June 27, 2017, "The political implications of the Grenfell Tower fire", the *World Socialist Web Site* made fundamental points deserving recollection on this anniversary.

We wrote, "In years to come it will be necessary to refer to the political life of Britain in terms of 'before' and 'after' Grenfell. This is because the tragedy has so cruelly exposed the underlying reality of social relations between the classes—and it did so in London, one of the richest cities in the world, and in London's richest constituency."

The article continued, "The horrifying loss of life epitomises the devastation capitalism has wrought on generations of working people. It is the outcome of a vast and ongoing transfer of society's wealth from the poor to the rich..."

"The burnt-out husk of the tower points an accusing finger

at the criminality of the political sociopath Margaret Thatcher and all those who followed her—Blair, Brown, Cameron, May—in an orgy of social vandalism designed to line the pockets and fill the coffers of the global elite."

The WSWS stressed that "the shock the tragedy has produced is mixed with outrage. Millions understand that Grenfell was not an accident, but a crime."

The crime was that of social murder, a concept coined by Frederick Engels, the co-founder of scientific socialism, in his 1845 study *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels wrote that the ruling elite of the day, in forcing the working class to live in deprivation and squalor, committed "social murder, that it has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long; that it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time."

Five years later, the main issue to be addressed is why not a single person in political or corporate circles has been brought to justice for this heinous crime.

The central organisational mechanism in preventing such a reckoning has been the official inquiry that was used to justify the de facto closing down of the Metropolitan Police's criminal investigation. The Grenfell Tower Inquiry is still taking evidence five years later, when everyone knows, and knew within hours of the inferno what caused it and who was responsible.

Years ago, the Metropolitan Police declared they would not seek to bring any prosecutions until after the inquiry completes its work. According to an update last month, the inquiry will take more evidence in July before closing hearings and drafting its report. No end date has yet been set for when its glacier-like proceedings will be completed.

The Inquiry was called just one day after the fire by then Prime Minister Theresa May, with her widely despised Conservative government fearing a social explosion. Two days after the fire, hundreds of local people stormed Kensington Town Hall to demand justice for the victims of the fire.

Evidence presented to the inquiry last month while May was calling the inquiry, meetings were held in Cabinet Office briefing rooms on June 16, attended by Downing Street staff and officials from the Ministry of Defence. Senior civil servant Mark Sedwill, formerly May's national security advisor at the Home Office, wrote that the government should consider designating someone as "gold minister" to handle the situation: "They would have to drop everything else. I fear this will become our New Orleans otherwise." This expressed the government's fear of an outbreak of social unrest as had occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the United States as Bush administration alternately ignored and denied aid to its victims.

The Public Inquiry has become the favoured means of ensuring that social rage is contained and diverted into safe channels. It is for this reason that May's inquiry was immediately backed by the Labour Party, then led by its nominal left leader Jeremy Corbyn, and the trade unions, in particular the Fire Brigades Union, and Britain's pseudo-left tendencies.

It was crystal clear then that the Inquiry would facilitate a cover-up led by a hand-picked stooge of the establishment, former High Court judge Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Its sole function was to subordinate all demands for justice to a process that would protect the guilty. May and Moore-Bick agreed that any investigating of causes of a "social, economic and political nature" were ruled out and that the Inquiry—under the Labour government's 2005 Inquiries Act—had no power to lay criminal charges. At the insistence of the political and corporate figures giving evidence, the attorney general and the Inquiry later agreed that these criminals would be granted immunity from any prosecution resulting from their oral evidence.

The Socialist Equality Party demanded from the outset that the guilty were arrested and prosecuted. These included leading figures in the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council, its tenant management organisation (KCTMO), and the owners of the firms who manufactured and installed the deadly cladding.

We also named former Mayor of London (2008-2016) and now Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who told protesting firefighters in 2013 to "get stuffed" after they warned his savage cuts would kill. The callousness of the ruling elite expressed in Johnson's statement was a precursor to his vicious response to mounting deaths in the pandemic when he declared as prime minister, "Let the bodies pile high in their thousands". This murderous agenda has seen almost 200,000 deaths from COVID.

On the second anniversary of the fire, the Socialist Equality Party urged the "Grenfell families and their legal

teams to withdraw all co-operation from the government's rotten inquiry."

Today it is still business as usual, with millions of people potentially facing the same horrific fate as those who died at Grenfell in dwellings the length and breadth of Britain. Despite the government promising to fix all such buildings, there are 1,100 residential tower blocks in London alone that still have serious fire safety issues, including high rises with the same flammable cladding that destroyed Grenfell Tower.

Nationally, the *Evening Standard* noted Monday, "More than 486 high-rise buildings in the country were found to be covered in Grenfell-style ACM cladding.

"The latest figures show that 58 of them still have the cladding and that remediation work is under way on 27. Work is yet to begin removing the ACM from the remaining 31 buildings."

At a public meeting on August 19, 2017, in a venue just metres from the burnt-out tower block, Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden said, "The SEP urges all survivors, local-residents and workers everywhere to place no confidence in May's rotten whitewash of an inquiry, or in Labour's attempt to make it more palatable. They must rely on themselves alone, on their social power. Workers must demand that all those guilty of social murder at Grenfell in both political and business circles are arrested, charged and put on trial."

The main lesson of Grenfell is do not trust the state, its political parties and its institutions to act in the interests of working people. What is required above all is a break from the straitjacket imposed by the Labour Party, the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party that trail in their wake. The occasion of the fifth anniversary must become the occasion for a renewed and politically independent fight for justice that can finally bring the criminals to account.

The WSWS has an archive of hundreds of articles on the Grenfell fire. We urge our readers to share these widely and to support the Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party.



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