

Firefighters exposed to toxins at Grenfell Tower fire diagnosed with incurable cancers

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Twelve firefighters among the 1,300 who attended the June 2017 Grenfell Tower inferno in London have developed incurable cancers—possibly the result of exposure to deadly contaminants released by the blaze. Some are relatively young men in their forties.

A *Mirror* investigation reported that the majority are suffering from digestive cancers and leukaemia, and that their number could rise to 20 as a list of firefighters at the scene who now have cancer is being compiled. It is feared this is “only this tip of the iceberg” as cancer can take up to 25 years to develop.

Grenfell underwent “refurbishment” on the cheap in 2014, during which the exterior was covered with highly combustible cladding, permitting a small kitchen fire to spread with exceptional ferocity—72 people died.

The blaze burned for 60 hours, releasing a thick black smoke so dense it was impossible for those trying to escape to see even their hands in front of their faces. It contained carcinogens released from the burning cladding.

Firefighters continued the rescue even as they ran out of oxygen, forced to breathe in the fumes.

Pictures taken at the time show them exhausted, clothed “in soot-covered personal protective equipment on the grass, drinking and eating,” which can lead to cancer of the digestive system.

The *Mirror* noted, “A 2019 study by the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) found soil contamination from the disaster caused by the fire could lead to an increased risk of cancer and respiratory problems of those living in the area.

“Analysis of soil, debris and char samples of insulation boards used on the tower revealed heightened concentrations of cancer-causing chemicals and proven carcinogens, including benzene, within 200m of the tower.”

Brian Flanagan, 47, a firefighter who attended the emergency, said, “What is out of the ordinary was the length of time we were there, and this is the problem. In a standard fire you would be there not more than four hours. When you get to that mark you get a relief crew. But I was at Grenfell for eight hours, twice as long as I should have been.” Many firefighters were on duty for 12 hours.

Research commissioned by the Fire Brigades’ Union from the UCLan found firefighters are twice as likely to develop cancer if they remain in their personal protective equipment longer than four hours. They face a similar risk if they notice soot in their nose or throat.

Another firefighter, a father in his 50s, who, “risked his life as he and his colleagues led a trapped family to safety” spoke anonymously. Grenfell “left him suicidal and suffering from scarred lungs,” reported the *Mirror*.

“We were quite early on the scene and got held in this underground car park and we were breathing all the toxins for ages,” he said.

The newspaper reported that the firefighter has “failed several medicals since the blaze because of his lung function and now needs inhalers.”

He told the *Mirror*, “Before Grenfell my health was great. I passed all the medicals and had no problems at all... It literally was within a month or so I started to get this cough and for me that’s when it started to go downhill.”

Long-term occupational health hazards for firefighters are severe. Another study by UCLan, “Scottish Firefighters Occupational Cancer and Disease Mortality Rates: 2000-2020”, found they had a mortality rate higher than the general population by a multiple of 1.6, based on data from the National Records of Scotland.

The study revealed the higher incidence of the

following cancers among firefighters:

- Prostate—3.8 times higher than the general population
- Leukaemia—17 times higher
- Oesophageal—2.42 times higher
- Cancers of unknown origin—6.37 times higher

The rate of heart attacks is five times higher than the general public, and three times higher for strokes.

Yet, as FBU national official Riccardo la Torre pointed out in response to the news of the Grenfell responders' illness, "Firefighters are left in the dark due to the lack of regular health surveillance and proper monitoring of exposures in the UK."

Inside Housing reported Friday on a memo from the company Celotex, sellers of the combustible insulation used in the Grenfell cladding, revealing that the company "had research which demonstrated that it produced acidic, toxic smoke when burned, 18 months before the blaze." Studies were commissioned comparing toxicity of its material to others on the market.

A fire expert reviewing the memo told *Inside Housing*, that "All smoke is toxic... They [Celotex] seemed interested in a plastic that is less toxic in fire than their competitors. They were not looking for a product that was of low toxicity. The difference is important."

During phase one of the inquiry into the fire, the company declared, "Celotex (PIR) insulation is an organic material and... releases a variety of gases on combustion. This information was well known by construction professionals and was clearly stated in Celotex's health and safety datasheet which was readily available to those responsible for the design and installation of the cladding system on Grenfell Tower."

It has already been revealed that Celotex falsified the results of tests so their product would pass the minimum standard of limited combustibility—adding fire resistant boards to a fire test.

Another conglomerate, Arconic, manufactured the cladding's outer rainscreen aluminium composite panels (ACM)—a layer of polyethylene sandwiched between two aluminium skins, which has been likened to solid petrol.

The suffering and illness of a significant number of the Grenfell firefighters makes even more filthy the moves by the authorities and Grenfell Inquiry to

scapegoat them for the disaster. Both first and second phases concentrated disproportionately on the efforts of a cash-strapped London Fire Brigade (LFB) to respond to a catastrophe created by rampant criminality in corporate and political circles—part of a clear agenda to pin the blame for Grenfell almost exclusively on the LFB.

Many responded to the news of the suffering firefighters with outrage.

Some asked why they had not been given sufficient protection:

Others warned of the still to be discovered impacts on local residents:

Many demanded that those responsible be held accountable and prosecuted:

The official inquiry hearings ended last November. It was set up as a government cover-up with no powers of prosecution, barred from investigating causes of a "social, economic and political nature."

Even as it prepares its final report, more crimes are being revealed. Over five years after the fire not a single person in corporate and political circles responsible for turning the building into an inferno has been arrested or prosecuted. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to reside in unsafe high-rise buildings covered in dangerous cladding.

Workers and youth should join the growing numbers demanding prosecution of the criminals who produced the Grenfell fire.

The WSWS archive of articles on the topic can be accessed here. Support the Grenfell Fire Forum established by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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