

Britain - a call to action: The fire at the Grenfell tower block was an entirely avoidable tragedy

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The fire at the Grenfell tower block was an entirely avoidable tragedy. Many people have died and dozens injured and hundreds made homeless. We do not yet know the true extent of the deaths. It is a heartbreaking situation and we in Left Unity extend our deepest sympathies to the bereaved and injured and solidarity to the survivors.

The fire fighters who fought the blaze say that they have never seen such a fire in many decades of their work. The fire took hold quickly, travelling up the height of the 24 floor block in less than half an hour. The fire fighters showed the most incredible bravery in going time and again into an inferno trying to reach people trapped in the upper floors of the block. We salute them.

Residents desperate to save their children threw them from the block. There was one report of a baby thrown from the 4th floor who was caught safely by those outside. The baby survived, but we do not know yet about the rest of the family. The outpouring of support and help from ordinary people has been tremendous and leads by example, of how our establishment should be responding to such a terrible human tragedy.

There needs to be a full public inquiry into the causes of this terrible fire leading to action with no delay. What is immediately clear is that the recommendations of a report commissioned into the fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell in 2009 have not been actioned. We need to know why. The Tories have obstructed the introduction of sprinkler systems into tower blocks. They need to be held to account.

Moreover, building regulations have not been revised for 11 years. The block had undergone major refurbishment with the addition of polyethylene cladding which was added to the block for aesthetic reasons. This cladding is certain to be one of the main subjects of the investigation as it was a cheaper, less flame-resistant version which apparently allowed the fire to spread quickly. The concerns of the residents over fire safety were repeatedly ignored by the management company responsible for the building. The single escape stairwell was in dilapidated condition. The fire alarms did not function adequately and could not be heard in the flats themselves. The advice to residents to stay put in the event of fire undoubtedly cost many their lives.

This was a social housing block with a working class residency. There is no doubt that had the tenants of luxury blocks of flats raised such concerns as those raised by the Grenfell they would have been listened to more seriously.

The working class in this country is treated with contempt no more so than in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. This is a hugely rich borough which claimed the refurbishments of the block had to be carried out with the residents in situ because it could not afford to house them elsewhere even on a temporary basis. Like other boroughs in London there is a desire to socially cleanse London of its working class inhabitants. Part of the reason given for the cladding was to

make the block less displeasing to the eye for tenants of luxury blocks nearby. The borough has to re-house the residents of Grenfell. They cannot be left in B &Bs for months on end. The block must be re-built with the same care and attention as the luxury blocks nearby. No doubt today even in the wake of these deaths there will be speculators, developers and private landlords working out how they can profit from this disaster. We cannot let this happen.

Following the fire, Theresa May made a private visit to the site. No press or television cameras were allowed to cover her visit and she met with no survivors. She continued her in camera premiership showing no respect and a good deal of cowardice in her action. The reason given by the BBC was that she feared receiving an angry response from residents had she met them. We guess that would have been the least of it. There is a deep, deep anger not only among those that have survived but in the whole community and well beyond.

Millions of people share that anger. They understand how the establishment and the rich in this country treat them with contempt. This understanding found its expression in the recent general election with the emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as the real leader in this country. Corbyn made a public visit to Grenfell in the full glare of the media. People understand and believe that he will get to the bottom of this tragedy and not try to cover it over as the Tories will.

Grenfell is a symptom of our age and the burnt out shell of the tower block a monument to Tory Britain. The people who died have not died in an accident, but in a wholly avoidable tragedy for which people have to be held to account. We have to press for criminal charges for corporate manslaughter for those who responsible for the fire at Grenfell. That should include those who sat on reports, ignored tenants' legitimate concerns and did not take action because of cost.

We can no longer go on as usual. There are countless deaths in this country because of benefit sanctions, because of pollution and poor air quality. Austerity has taken a terrible toll on working people while the rich have benefited enormously.

We have to make sure the residents of Grenfell receive justice and proper compensation for all that they have suffered.

The huge anger over Grenfell is growing and it threatens to sweep away this government. We have to work to make sure it does and that it is replaced by one whose central concern is that of social justice.

For the many not the few.

Andrew Burgin, 15 June 2017

P.S.

* <http://leftunity.org/grenfell-a-call-to-action/>