

Flint, Michigan residents speak about London fire

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When residents in Flint, Michigan, learned of the deadly fire at Grenfell Tower on June 14 in west London, they felt a common bond with the victims and the survivors. As in the Flint water crisis, a cover-up of a criminal conspiracy is being carried out by the government.

In the Grenfell Tower inferno, at least 79 people died, and there will likely be many more victims. Nearly two weeks since the deadly fire, many children and adults are still unaccounted for among the 600 residents. The working-class and poor residents of Grenfell Tower lived in a death trap surrounded by one of the wealthiest areas in the world, where the average price of a terrace house is over \$4 million.

An external façade made of aluminum and flammable insulation, known as cladding, was installed last year to make Grenfell Tower less of an eyesore to the borough's rich residents and ensure that their property values weren't negatively impacted. The siding, which is produced by the American corporation Arconic, formerly Alcoa, is banned in the US but is used in the UK and many other countries. Tenants' warnings about safety hazards were ignored, coupled with years of cuts to the fire service, and deregulation in housing and safety codes.

The poisoning of Flint is also the result of a criminal conspiracy. A handful of bankers, financial speculators and private companies in the water business, aided by bought-off politicians, concocted a scheme to build a new water pipeline, the KWA, to make millions of dollars. State and local officials switched the city's water supply to the polluted Flint River, even though the city's antiquated water treatment plant was unable to make the water safe.

More than three years after the decision to switch the water supply, virtually nothing has been done to

address the catastrophic health consequences of the lead poisoning of tens of thousands of working-class residents. For 18 months after the switch, government officials on all levels covered up the crime. Today, city officials are resuming water shutoffs and are threatening to foreclose on the homes of workers who fail to pay for water tainted by lead and other toxins. Nearly nothing has been done to replace the decaying water infrastructure.

Florlisa, a resident who has been actively exposing the Flint water crisis since the switch to the Flint River, told the WSW: "What happened at Grenfell Tower was horrific. The authorities used siding knowing that they were shoving people into an unsafe situation. They made the outside shiny and pretty with no regard for the working class and poor people who lived inside. Just as in Flint, the decision-makers in London are not concerned about the health or safety of their citizens."

Residents of Grenfell Tower had complained for years that the 24-story public housing block was unsafe. The Grenfell Action Group predicted a "serious and catastrophic incident." The apartment building lacked fire alarms and sprinklers and had only a single staircase.

"Like those residents, I know from experience that people don't just look for things to complain about. But when you are hurting and suffering, that's when you start complaining. We did the same thing in Flint. We noticed the foul smell and color and taste of the water a few months after the switch from Detroit to the Flint River. When we protested and tried to bring this to the attention of the authorities, we were treated with hostility. The powers-that-be accused us of being crazy. Poisoned water was pouring into our homes and bodies for 18 months before the officials even admitted a problem!"

It was the scientific evidence provided by residents to Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech and Dr. Mona-Hanna Attisha that forced the elected officials to finally acknowledge that lead had leached from the pipes due to the lack of corrosion-control treatment of the toxic Flint River.

Florlisa noted: “The water crisis in Flint erupted publically around election time—as it did in Britain. We ousted our mayor over this, but to this day, nothing has been resolved. The issues in London and Flint are very similar. The decision-makers in both places are about cutting corners. They were looking at their finances, and the result in both cases is an atrocity. There is no concern for even a minimal quality of life. They don’t respect human life when it impacts working class and poor people. When a society cannot provide safe water, safe shelter and safe food, it means the basic fabric of what we need to live is being attacked. These are basic necessities. Why is it too much to ask for water that won’t hurt us or housing that won’t kill us? The working class is stuck. We have to stand up together all over the world. Any day of the week, I have more in common with a family from Grenfell Tower than I do with the class of rich American businessmen. It’s the same profit system that is doing this to us.”

Elijah, a young worker with two children, told the WSWS, “I haven’t been directly faced with death the way the people have in London but it’s the exact same thing as here. Something bad happens and the people in power try to flee from the situation and from their responsibility. We do have something common with those folks in London.

“People lost their lives even though they warned many times about the fire hazards.” Speaking directly to the murderous Council apartment owners, Elijah said, “You wanted to go the cheap way so you could keep more money in your pockets.”

“It took many times for us here to be heard. We said this is not the same water when they told us they were switching over. We know here what the Flint River is and can’t imagine the thought of even drinking water from it. How can it be purified? They have found dead bodies in that river. Why would that be our water source? Now they want to start taking property from people—and that’s all they have.”

Elijah compared this to London and the attempts to push poor people out of the city with gentrification. In

Flint, this is taking place around Kettering University and the University of Flint, where the more affluent residents live. Working-class and elderly residents are being pushed out with everything from exorbitant water rates, the purchasing and razing of foreclosed and tax reverted properties, to auto insurance rates of \$800 a month for certain zip codes in Flint.

“It is evident that the system is run by the wealthy. They are the only ones that are going to survive unless the people step up and be heard. Sometimes we have to take action. We have to also think about the system and the extremes that they will go to. They have no problem with wanting to kill us. I watched a documentary about Carnegie and how his man Frick, in 1892 in Homestead, Pennsylvania, brought in the militia to kill them [the strikers]. Because of his money nobody wanted to touch him. Money is power to them.”

Nathan, a college student from Minnesota, was visiting a friend near Flint. He told the WSWS: “It’s not just one person. It’s not the governor who is making the pipes bad. It is the whole system. It’s everything. There’s nobody helping the problem. The people on the ground know it’s wrong and are saying that it’s wrong. The people higher up admit that these are real issues that we could solve with real money—but they just don’t do it. Flint residents can’t shower, so they have to buy bottles of water and pour it on themselves. That is not okay.”

Referring to the Grenfell fire, Nathan said, “When you have disparities between the wealthy and the poor, you can separate which people you want to be with and which people you don’t want to be with. The wealthy people don’t want to interact with the poor people, so they are creating more disparities.”



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