

After the Grenfell Fire inquiry: Where are the arrests?

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12 September 2024

The final report of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry confirmed what millions of people already knew: that a gang of criminal businessmen and politicians have been walking free for seven years longer than they should have.

According to a former chief prosecutor, they will likely have at least another five while the Metropolitan Police investigation drags on and the UK's creaking court system slowly grinds its gears.

Grenfell was such a horrific and obvious crime that a total cover-up was impossible. Instead, the government went for the tried-and-tested strategy of delay, announcing a public inquiry. Now that process has finally had to report its findings, and they are damning.

Successive governments' bonfire of regulations

The document begins with the regulatory environment and safety standards enforced by the government—or rather, not enforced.

Experts warned of the role of cladding in fires in multiple-storey buildings in 1992, after the Knowsley Heights tower fire in Merseyside the year before, and then again in 1999 after the Garnock Court in Scotland. Nothing was done, not even to ban the use of combustible cladding on high-rise buildings. The governments of John Major (Conservative) and then Tony Blair (Labour) pointed to the fact that such material met a “Class Zero” standard.

Class Zero was even at that stage an old and inadequate classification with its origins in the Building Act 1984. It depends on two outdated tests of individual products which only deal with the spread of flames over their surface, not its combustibility.

The inquiry points to a deliberate cover-up. A 1999 report was edited to remove references to problems with official guidance.

Then, in 2001, a safety test of the kind of cladding used at Grenfell produced a devastating failure in which the material “burned violently”. The results were not released, and the Blair government changed no regulations. Even when six people were killed in the 2009 fire at Lakanal House in London, and a coroner requested a review of building regulations, the matter was ignored.

There was little chance of the Labour government being held accountable for its inaction, since in 1997 the outgoing Tory government had privatised the Building Research Establishment (BRE)—the expert adviser to the government on building safety. In other words, the fox was put in charge of the henhouse. According to the inquiry, it “sacrificed rigorous application of principle [lives] to its commercial interests [profits],” exposing the industry to “unscrupulous product manufacturers”.

The doors were flung open even wider by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, which came to power in 2010 with the plan to rip up

“red tape” health and safety regulations for the sake of corporate profits. Its agenda, the inquiry reports, “dominated the [housing] department’s thinking to such an extent that even matters affecting the safety of life were ignored, delayed or disregarded”.

The ministry’s building control division had its team more than halved to six people, with no budget to hire support and no “ability nor capacity to issue practical guidance to industry because its systems... had become obsolete”.

The Minister in charge, Eric Pickles, told the inquiry fire safety building regulations were protected from the crusade, evidence that was “flatly contradicted by that of his officials and the contemporaneous documents.” According to the report, “policy on deregulation... impede[d] the ability of officials to promote changes ... that would improve public safety.”

At the local level, the Tenant Management Organisation and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) responsible for Grenfell Tower were responsible for a “serious failure... to observe its basic responsibilities.” Both demonstrated “persistent indifference to fire safety, particularly the safety of vulnerable people,” including by installing the wrong fire doors in 2011. RBKC “failed to perform its statutory function of ensuring that the design of the refurbishment complied with the Building Regulations.”

Big business takes advantage

With license to lie, cheat and skimp to boost their bottom lines, the companies involved with the 2015-16 refurbishment of Grenfell did just that. The report speaks for itself: “One very significant reason why Grenfell Tower came to be clad in combustible materials was systematic dishonesty on the part of those who made and sold the rainscreen cladding... and insulation.”

They engaged in “deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent data and mislead”.

Arconic, the multibillion-dollar US company which manufactured Reynobond PE cladding, commissioned fire tests of the material when folded into a cassette form (as on Grenfell) which showed them to be a serious fire hazard. But the company “deliberately concealed from the market the true extent of the danger of using Reynobond 55 PE in cassette form, particularly on high-rise buildings”.

For close to a decade, it “sought to exploit what it perceived to be a weak regulatory regime in the UK” and concealed the results of the fire tests from the British Board of Agrément (BBA)—the UK’s main, private, construction certification company.

Even as the dangers posed by their product were repeatedly proved, Arconic carried on. After a consultant compared the combustibility of 5,000 square metres of aluminium composite polyethylene cladding to a

truck containing 19,000 litres of oil, in a 2007 presentation, the inquiry reports, “there is no evidence that anyone at Arconic took steps to examine the safety of Reynobond”.

The consultant had suggested a building fire could kill 60-70 people, warning in particular of the danger of toxic smoke inhalation.

In 2009, emails circulated in Arconic warning of the dangers of aluminium composite material when folded into cassettes—pointing to a fire in Romania—but were marked “VERY CONFIDENTIAL!!!!”

In 2014, senior Arconic executive Claude Wehrle told company sales staff the fire safety rating of the product had been downgraded, but the BBA was not informed and so did not alter its performance certificate. Arconic’s UK salesperson Deborah French did not raise the safety downgrade with her Grenfell client.

The inquiry concludes, “Arconic... promoted and sold a product knowing that it presented a significant danger to those who might use any buildings in which it was used.”

Kingspan, also a multibillion-euro company, based in Ireland, provided 5 percent of the Grenfell cladding, but more importantly “created a false market in insulation for use on buildings over 18 metres in height” by claiming a fire test of a wall system had shown it was safe. This “was a false claim, as it well knew”. Multiple tests had been “disastrous”. But the company “made a calculated decision to mask, or distract from, the absence of supporting test evidence” in order to keep selling its K15 insulation product.

A query over safety from another company, Wintech, prompted Philip Heath, senior manager at Kingspan to write, “Wintech can go fuck themselves, and if they are not careful we’ll sue the arse off them.” In fact, reports the inquiry, the company had “long-running internal discussions about what it could get away with” that “betrayed no concern for accuracy”. It showed “deeply entrenched and persistent dishonesty... in pursuit of commercial gain”.

Celotex, a competitor, when it failed to produce its own version of Kingspan’s product while actually meeting safety standards, adopted its own “dishonest” methods “to mislead its customers and the wider market” about its RS5000 foam insulation. This included fudging fire tests, with the complicity of the BRE. “Celotex presented RS5000 to Harley [Facades construction company] as suitable and safe for use on Grenfell Tower, although it knew that was not the case.”

When it came to carrying out the refurbishment work, there was a “merry-go-round of buck passing” in which Harley, architects Studio E and main contractor Rydon all refused to take on responsibility for safety standards. Under Rydon’s direction, “there was a failure to establish clearly who was responsible for what, including who was responsible for ensuring the designs were compliant with statutory requirements.” Its attitude to fire safety was described as “casual”.

Harley “did not concern itself with fire safety at any stage”.

It was “Studio E’s responsibility to determine whether the use of such material would enable to building to comply with regulations.” Its failure to do so meant it bore a very significant degree of responsibility for the disaster.” The company failed even to ensure that consultant Exova completed the fire safety strategy for the refurbished building.

Exova’s conduct, meanwhile, “was wholly inconsistent with the careful approach to matters affecting the safety of life to be expected of a reasonably competent fire engineer.”

Social murder and the fight for justice

Given no option to deny rampant criminality in front of it, the inquiry takes refuge in references to a “rotten culture” and “seriously defective”

systems which “failed” residents. All true. And at the same time all designed to widen the focus so much that sight is lost of the fact: identifiable people made decisions they knew risked working-class lives, and that they were happy to do so because they considered those lives valueless next to the profits to be made.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has described the consequences as social murder, following the revolutionary Friedrich Engels, who wrote in 1845, “When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death...” and “yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.”

There is no crime of social murder on the statute books, but there is corporate manslaughter, incurring an unlimited fine; gross negligence manslaughter, with a maximum sentence of 18 years imprisonment; fraud, with a maximum sentence of 10 years; and various health and safety offences carrying fines and prison terms. The police investigation is reportedly considering them all.

A campaign must be taken up to ensure those responsible for the Grenfell Tower Fire are held accountable in this way. The inquiry has provided the first draft of the charge sheet; it should be acted upon, as it already is by the companies and individuals named in its findings, who are repeating their denials, and will doubtless be spending millions on lawyers and legal advice. It will take a mass movement of the working class to see justice done.

In one of its first statements on the fire, headlined “Corporate mass murder in London”, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that the public inquiry was “aimed at ensuring a cover-up and the protection of those responsible”, demanding that they be “arrested and face criminal proceedings”. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have upheld this call ever since.

Two months after the fire, the SEP hosted a public meeting in the area under the title, “Social Murder: A crime against the working class”, attended by around 100 people. SEP National Secretary Chris Marsden called on “all survivors, local residents and workers everywhere to place no confidence in [then Prime Minister Theresa] 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.”

At that meeting, the SEP announced the formation of a Grenfell Fire Forum which would work to expose the government’s inquiry and mobilise workers in the fight for justice. With the inquiry now concluded and attention turned to the police investigation, that fight is more urgent than ever.

The Grenfell Fire and capitalism

The Socialist Equality Party wrote in a Perspective article posted on the WSWS, “The political implications of the Grenfell Tower fire”, that it summed up the terrible reality of life for the working class under capitalism, exposing “the underlying reality of social relations between the classes...”

“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 Grenfell inferno was no freak accident, but the product of the brutal capitalist organisation of society in which the profit motive means regulators are needed to ensure companies do not try to get rich at the cost of other people’s safety—and in which those regulators are inevitably co-opted or made toothless by those private companies or their bought-and-paid-for politicians, Labour as well as Tory. A society in which working-class residents are left with no voice or democratic recourse when their building is made a death-trap.

This reality has since been confirmed by the fact that even now, seven years on from the disaster, thousands of buildings are still covered with the same cladding as Grenfell Tower was; their private owners dragging their feet over renovations, charging residents lifechanging sums of money to fund remedial work which should have been done by private developers in the first place.

It has been confirmed on a global scale by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which millions of lives—overwhelmingly of the poorest and most disadvantaged—have been needlessly lost, victims of a long-term assault on public health provision and of a strategy of “learning to live with the virus” designed to keep money flowing to the corporations.

A campaign for justice, arrests and prosecutions over Grenfell cannot be the end of the struggle, but a step towards ending the sacrifice of human life to profit, the rampage of private companies over society and the domination of politics by big businesses, their lawyers and their lobbyists. This means the fight of the working class for socialism.



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