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TO: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Grenfell Tower Inquiry - FBU members' update

Since September 2020, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry has been hearing evidence from the contractors involved in the refurbishment of the tower and the manufacturers of the cladding and insulation products. In over three and a half years since the fire, we are finally and slowly hearing how it was possible for such dangerous materials to be used on a residential building. These facts are exposing the real factors which led to such a devastating fire and such a terrible loss of life.

Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry actually began in January this year, but was mired with disruptions. Firstly, it was suspended for some weeks while the Attorney General considered a request by some of the corporations involved in the refurbishment – including Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (the 'TMO') - for a guarantee that the evidence they would give would not be used to further a criminal prosecution against them. Shortly after that an undertaking was granted and the hearings restarted. However, the inquiry then had to be called off again because of the national Covid-19 lockdown.

This phase of the inquiry is intended to look at the causes of the devastating fire. It is divided into eight modules, the first of which covered the Primary Refurbishment (Overview and Cladding). Witnesses from the design, construction and management organisations – including Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) building control - gave their accounts of the decisions made in the over-cladding of the tower. Module 2, which began at the start of November 2020 and concludes in February 2021, covers the Cladding Products - Testing/Certification, Marketing/Promotion.

The refurbishment contractors

The evidence given by the key companies involved in the refurbishment - such as Rydon (the project managers), Studio E (the architects), and Harley (the cladding designers) – has revealed the total absence of any consideration of fire safety in the selection and installation of the materials used to clad the tower. Again and again, when asked about the regulations that govern fire safety in external walls, the witnesses expressed either ignorance, sketchy knowledge, confusion or the assumption that it was the responsibility of another company in the supply chain. The evidence has been clear: instead of being a priority, fire safety was barely even an afterthought at Grenfell.

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The manufacturers

Next came the evidence from the companies who manufactured the materials in the rainscreen cladding system used on the tower. This evidence has been nothing short of horrifying. With fire safety relegated to the bottom of the pile, the big players in the cladding industry were able to push their dangerous products into the market.

Celotex and Kingspan – the manufacturers of the combustible insulation used behind the ACM cladding – were both engaged in a game of falsifying fire tests and duping the organisations that certify the safety of construction products in order to access the lucrative high rise market in the UK. Celotex, falsified the fire test results of its RS5000 insulation boards by using fire retardants and obtained approval from building control bodies under false pretences. Kingspan threatened to sue Britain's biggest building control body, the National House Building Council (NHBC) when it raised doubts about the suitability of its plastic foam insulation (K15) on buildings over 18m. Just weeks after the fire, rather than seek to learn lessons and accept responsibility, Kingspan engaged PR firms to lobby the government and set up rigged tests on non-combustible materials (mineral wool) to argue that they were no safer than its K15.

Finally, Arconic – the manufacturer of the now banned ACM PE cladding panels – knew its product was highly flammable and yet knowingly promoted its sale in the UK taking advantage of our weaker regulatory regime. Key witnesses from Arconic are refusing to attend the Inquiry. Arconic, Kingspan and Celotex, are all still blaming each other.

Austerity

A profit-seeking, 'sinister' and deceitful picture is emerging of the construction, cladding, testing and certification industries that conduct their operations without proper scrutiny. Under austerity, their activities have gone even further under the radar. Austerity cuts had a direct and devastating impact on the ability of the council's building control inspector, John Hoban, to give the project the attention it deserved. In 2013, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea underwent 'restructuring' that left Mr Hoban covering the work of three members of staff with over 130 projects to oversee. He resigned in 2017, just before the fire and explained: *"I resigned because I had enough. I wasn't able to do the job how I was taught to do it. It was affecting my health and I just didn't want to work there any more"*.

The shocking accounts from those involved in refurbishing Grenfell Tower give strength to the position the FBU has held from the start: that fire safety cannot be left to the free market but needs regulation and proper resourcing. The regime which led to the Grenfell disaster has been created by political decisions driven by corporate interests, whose only motivation is to endlessly expand their profits. They have created a system in their own interests; one which fails to recognise the needs and rights of tenants and residents - or of firefighters who may be required to attend fires in such circumstances.

We continue to make these arguments and actively participate in the inquiry. As you will see from the timetable below, the inquiry is not due to conclude until the end of 2022 – more than five years after the fire. Alongside the bereaved, survivors and residents and as a result of the dire evidence on building safety heard so far, we are calling on the inquiry Chair to report his findings to the Prime Minister as soon as possible in order to ensure that the lessons learned are acted upon now.

Inquiry timetable

The Inquiry will resume on 11 January 2021 and will continue to hear evidence from the manufacturers and certification bodies of the products used on Grenfell. The Inquiry will then continue to examine evidence in another six modules:

Module 3 - Management of the building and compliance with regulation (ending May 2021)

Module 4 – The Aftermath

Module 5 – Firefighting

Module 6 – Government

Module 7 – The Expert

Module 8 – The Deceased

The Inquiry is due to conclude at the end of 2022.

Press coverage

Despite Phase 2 of the GTI uncovering the causes of the fire and those responsible, the media has been largely silent – in stark contrast to the wall to wall coverage of the firefighting and rescue efforts of our members on the night of the fire (Phase 1). Some good accounts of key evidence heard in Phase 2 can be found through the following links:

“Grenfell Tower Refurbishment: a timeline” (Inside Housing, 27/11/20) - (attached)

“Grenfell is becoming our worst corporate scandal” (The Times, 13/12/20) - (attached)

'A raging inferno': testimony reveals how deadly cladding ended up on Grenfell Tower (The Guardian - 16/12/20):

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/16/a-raging-inferno-testimony-reveals-how-deadly-cladding-ended-up-on-grenfell-tower>

How they built Grenfell - (The New Statesman, 11/12/20) – (attached)

The BBC podcasts are definitely worth a listen:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p066rd9t/episodes/downloads>

More on Kingspan

<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/grenfell-tower-inquiry-has-proven-to-be-a-bruising-experience-for-kingspan-39854173.html>

<https://www.thejournal.ie/kingspan-grenfell-public-inquiry-5296328-Dec2020/>

Conclusion: anger and outrage

The contrast between media coverage at Phase 1 and Phase 2 will not be lost on any FBU members. It is a national disgrace that this exposure of an utterly rotten and corrupt system is not receiving the media attention it deserves. When firefighters took the stand - voluntarily - they were subject to intense questioning and faced daily headline coverage. They were often subject to unfair and ill-informed criticism. The story of corporate killing which is now being exposed is relegated to coverage by a small handful of honourable and determined journalists.

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The FBU said from the start that the inquiry was back to front. It was impossible to reasonably assess the response of firefighters without knowing why the fire spread as it did and why the building behaved as it did. We have been proved entirely correct on this point.

We warned from the start that a public inquiry was no guarantee of justice. The GTI was established by Theresa May. Her aim was not to address the fundamental structural issues of a profit driven system but rather to delay any action - to 'kick the can down the road' as far as possible.

Nevertheless, we continue to work, alongside others in the community, to challenge these failings, to expose the real causes of the Grenfell disaster and to defend the role of the firefighters who attended and who put their own lives on the line to try to save others. This battle is far from over.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

MW/sll