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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Grenfell Tower Inquiry: FBU Members' update January 2022 #2

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) has completed its Module 5 on firefighting and begun on Module 6 on government, part of its Phase 2 investigation of the background to the fire. The Fire Brigades Union is a core participant in the GTI and has made numerous written statements, submissions, questions and evidence available to the inquiry.

FBU Closing Statement and Submission on 'Firefighting'

The FBU wants the inquiry to hold politicians and business to account for cuts and deregulation, which ultimately set the context for the fire. We have argued from the beginning that it is wrong to blame firefighters who attended or the London Fire Brigade (LFB) alone for nationwide failures that led to the ongoing building safety crisis.

On 24 January 2022, the FBU's counsel Martin Seaward made the union's closing statement on Module 5: Firefighting, putting the issues in context. The FBU said from the outset that the inquiry could better assess firefighting procedure and training after looking first at all the regulatory and guidance context within which the fire and rescue services developed their policies and procedures.

Mr Seaward said:

"Although the lessons can and must be learned from a disaster, including by the LFB and the wider fire and rescue service, the building failure was so total and the systemic failings so widespread across the country that it would be wrong to scapegoat the fire and rescue service for the failures of central government and a corporate culture that made people's homes unsafe. The disaster was not caused by the LFB, but by individual private companies which were allowed to put profit before people".

Defence of firefighters

Mr Seaward made a robust defence of the firefighters who attended the Grenfell Tower fire. He said:

"We contend it's unfair to criticise the first two incident commanders for not revoking stay put in the first hour of the disaster. The individual firefighters who attended the disaster, including the first two incident commanders, and the supervisors of the control room staff, should be relieved, we submit, of any individual blame. Grenfell Tower was not their fault."

On the issue of pre-planning, Mr Seaward said:

"The Chair has already found that no personal criticism can be made of WM Dowden or any of the other firefighters who visited GT before the fire to carry out 7(2)(d) visits given their lack of training [...] The evidence in Module 5 has supported that conclusion, and shown also the effect of the lack of resources".

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Further, Mr Seaward also made clear the context for control room staff in dealing with the unprecedented volume of calls on the night of the fire:

"We submit that with deficient policies, limited experience, an absence of relevant training, and a shortage of staff including supervising officers, the control staff were not provided with the tools to enable them to handle the multiple FSG calls generated by the GT fire, to liaise with the incident commander to discuss the worsening situation or to reverse the stay-put advice".

Instead, *"They were swamped and did their best in harrowing circumstances"*.

Criticisms of the FBU

Over the course of the firefighting evidence, there have been a number of criticisms made of the FBU by senior representatives of LFB. In our statement, Mr Seaward set the record straight on matters of industrial action:

"The FBU firmly rejects the suggestion by former Commissioner Mr Dobson and Commissioner Andy Roe that industrial action by its members was in any way responsible for any of the failures of the LFB including in relation to learning the lessons from Lakanal House or in the provision of training. Those principal officers were clutching at straws and trying to deflect blame onto their workforce for their own significant and long-term failures. The reality is that there is no evidence the FBU's lawful industrial action was a factor in the failures of LFB's principal officers to properly train their operational crews including disseminating lessons from major fires such as Lakanal House".

The role of government

The inquiry now moves onto matters of Westminster government policy. It will call civil servants and ministers in the coming months. They have many serious questions to answer about what they knew of the dangers of flammable cladding, how widespread its use was and their role in promoting business interests above health and safety. The FBU expects the lawyers to put ministers and their advisors – including chief fire officers – under the same rigorous spotlight that they have applied to earlier witnesses.

The GTI should be challenging ministers about their policies of privatisation and deregulation, which impacted on building safety and fire safety. It should ask why they scrapped national standards, national statutory advisory bodies and even the fire service inspectorate in England. They should question the austerity agenda, imposed by Westminster and carried out by mayors and fire authorities, which removed one-in-five firefighters since 2010.

Only then will it become clear how central government and its ruthless promotion of market freedoms above public safety, paved the way for the Grenfell Tower fire.

We strongly encourage members to tune in to the hearings over the coming weeks and we will share timetables with you as soon as they are announced.

Further information

We encourage you to read our full statement (Closing Written Statement to Modules 5 and 6-1) which is now publically available on the GTI website. It is also possible to access the recording of our Oral statement which took place at 14:30 on 24 January 2022. (<https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/hearings/module-5-6-firefighting-closing-statements-24-january-2022>)

Yours in unity



Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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