

Editorial

Grenfell Tower, a crime

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On 14 June, a 24-floor tower block caught fire in upmarket Kensington at the foot of Notting Hill in London. The current – still uncertain – death toll stands at 80. Five months after the tragedy, hundreds of its former residents are having to live in precarious conditions.

The fire's material causes are known. Started by a faulty fridge, it rapidly spread to the whole building – a tower block without adequate fire-fighting facilities. The outside cladding consisted of an inner layer of polyisocyanurate (PIR), a foam-based insulating material, and an outer layer of polyethylene sandwiched between two thin layers of aluminium sheeting. An air gap separated the two layers. PIR is an inexpensive material with very good thermal insulation properties but combustible. It releases toxic fumes such as hydrogen cyanide when it burns. The air gap acted as a chimney, helping to spread the flames and combustion gases.

In most other European countries, the use of PIR for insulating this type of building is banned. There was nothing exceptional about the risk: it was known to building experts and the public authorities.

So why did the fire happen? The answer to this question has political and social roots, transforming what might seem to be an accident into a mass crime. Why indeed? Though the chain of causes is long, it can be summed up in one sentence: the Grenfell Tower residents paid the price for the rapid growth of social inequality.

The majority of residents of such social housing are migrant workers. A poor population in a rich neighbourhood, they reported the dangers to which they were exposed on many occasions. The tower's residents' association had for instance reported the malfunctioning of smoke detection systems months before the fire, as well as the absence of protection around the gas mains. Building inspection departments did not react at all to these complaints. And for the mainstream press, these were nothing but poor

immigrants endangering the rich whites. Anything different was inconceivable.

For more than 20 years, the British government has been working to the principle of *better regulation*. Introduced by Tony Blair in 1997, it is based on the conviction that state regulation hinders free enterprise, as well as industrial and commercial initiative, and that it could develop a culture of risk aversion among the working classes. All successor governments have adhered to this idea, with the tabloids making the *nanny state* one of their main targets.

The consequences: fire protection rules have been simplified and controls relaxed, the administrative burden for companies is constantly being reduced for the benefit of shareholder profits, and public budgets are subject to austerity measures. This regime has been enthusiastically embraced by European Union institutions, explaining why, at a European level, serious risks are tolerated as long as they help boost company profits: glyphosate, endocrine disruptors, etc. The list is unending.

Coming back to the case of Grenfell Tower, built in 1974, it was the subject of major refurbishment work in 2016, part of which involved installing the PIR cladding. In line with *better regulation* principles, there are increasingly fewer in-depth standards for this type of work, with preference given to company self-regulation. Companies are thus supposed to assess the risks themselves and take decisions based on a cost-benefit calculation of the margin of acceptable risk. In this case, they considered the risk to be tolerable as the probability of a fire was viewed as low. Useless to say that the laws of the market make risks all the more acceptable when the potential victims do not belong to the privileged classes. And if their skin colour is darker than usual, an extra dose of risk does not go amiss.

As is the case in most major construction projects, the work was awarded to those

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companies offering the lowest costs. The choice of a dangerous insulation material pushed costs down by GBP 300 000, out of a total 10-million budget. 80 deaths for a saving representing only 3% of the total budget... To reduce costs, such work is organised using a complex subcontracting cascade, with the result that, at the end of the day, nobody had any control over the whole project, unless it is written down in a documentation so formalised that it has nothing to do with everyday work reality.

Grenfell Tower: a crime with 80 deaths. Yet insufficient prevention of work-related cancers is the cause of 100 000 deaths a year in the European Union. One Grenfell Tower every eight hours. While the Grenfell Tower deaths got weeks of media coverage, victims of occupational cancers go generally unmentioned. But they are killed by the same causes: the growth of social inequality, the servility with which a large section of elected representatives accepts subordinating public policies to the interests of the privileged. The massive demonstrations in the aftermath of the fire constitute a glimmer of hope, pointing to a will to regain control over living and working conditions, a will to revitalise bottom-up politics. ●