

Britain: Blair government refuses public inquiry into biggest fire in Europe

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The Blair government has rejected calls for a public inquiry into what Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott admitted was “the biggest fire in Europe” since World War Two.

On December 11, 2005 a huge explosion ripped through the Buncefield oil storage depot at Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire, northwest of London, decimating the depot and surrounding houses and offices. The depot stores 16 million litres of petrol, diesel, kerosene and aviation fuel. It took 650 firefighters four days to bring the raging inferno, burning in 20 different storage tanks, under control. (See: Buncefield Oil Depot ‘Big Fire’ Page)

The blast was heard over 100 miles away and produced a huge plume of thick smoke that drifted over the capital in a matter of hours and spread across the entire southeast of England. By chance, the weather conditions meant the thick cloud stayed thousands of metres in the air and did not drift down to the ground affecting people’s health.

Also by chance the blast occurred early on a Sunday morning, so that only two people were seriously hurt and 40 people were injured. Considering that a large part of the depot and nearby buildings were completely demolished by the blasts, authorities described it as a miracle that there were no fatalities. If the incident had occurred during the week casualties could easily have numbered in the hundreds.

Up to 20,000 workers are employed on the Maylands Avenue Estate which lies alongside the depot. It is eastern England’s largest business park and has become a centre for companies involved in the IT and retail distribution trade. Offices belonging to over 30 of the 400 companies were entirely destroyed and many of the others suffered damage calculated at £50 million, according to David Way, director at the London-based insurance brokers Alexander Forbes. Way also estimates up to £100 million worth of damage at the oil depot itself and that £20 million worth of fuel went up in flames. The blast also damaged houses, some of which lie on the Woodhall Farm housing estate half a mile from the depot and are built on the site of the former Brock’s fireworks factory in the 1970s. Some 2,000 people were evacuated from their homes following the explosion.

The BBC reported that up to 5,000 people were unemployed for Christmas as a direct result of the explosion. The long-term consequences could be far greater. A number of businesses, including Fujifilm, have threatened not to re-open unless something is done about the oil depot.

One worker explained, “My wife is a full-time self-employed admin worker for one of the big companies on Maylands Avenue. She has no other clients and has not worked since the Buncefield explosion. It appears that she will be paid up to the event, but after this she is on her own. Her employers have not indicated if and when she will be working again, but have clearly said that they would not pay her in the interim period between the incident and the restart of work.”

Residents living near the oil depot sent a petition to Home Secretary Charles Clarke on January 3 calling for a full public inquiry into the explosion and fire. Their solicitor, Des Collins, said: “No one seems to

understand that this community has been destroyed.... We feel that the Home Office is the only possible government department that will look at the issues and order a public inquiry.”

Rachael Lampey, a local resident, said, “Perhaps a company or individual should be held responsible to ensure it doesn’t happen again. If the site is to stay there—how safe is the area for residents and businesses?”

So far there has been no indication that the disaster will be subject to a public enquiry. Instead, the chairman of the government’s Health and Safety Commission, Bill Callaghan, said an internal inquiry would be held by the Environment Agency (EA) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and a report published. He promised it “would be the most wide-ranging health and safety inquiry since the investigation into the Potters Bar rail crash in 2002.”

The comparison with Potters Bar gives some indication of the direction the enquiry will take. A few days before Callaghan’s statement, the government ruled out a public inquiry into the rail crash at Potters Bar, which claimed seven lives. Last October the Crown Prosecution Service ruled that no criminal charges would be brought against any individual or corporation for gross negligence manslaughter in relation to it.

Instead of a public inquiry into the Buncefield explosion, Callaghan has asked the “competent authorities”—i.e., the EA and HSE—“to examine their own role in regulating the activities at Buncefield under COMAH (Control of Major Accident Hazards) regulations.” The COMAH regulations were introduced after the Flixborough chemical explosion in northern England in 1974 that killed 28 workers and destroyed or damaged 1,800 buildings near the site.

The remit of the joint HSE/EA investigation is “to share any immediate lessons with the wider industry and ... publish a report on the incident, the investigation and implications for the control and mitigation of on and off-site risks.” It is unlikely to enquire how local planners (along with the HSE and EA) allowed housing and workplaces to be built so close to the oil depot in the first place and will not question the commercial decisions that led to the depot’s expansion and drove the building spree in the area around it.

The depot is operated by Total UK, a subsidiary of the French oil giant Total, in a joint venture with Texaco, but is also used by BP and Shell. It is the fifth largest in the UK, loading approximately 400 road tankers a day and connected by pipelines to nearby Heathrow and Luton airports. The depot is said to supply a third of the fuel for Heathrow and has led to shortages at the airport with long-haul flights being forced to make extra refuelling stops.

Total were also owners of the AZF chemical plant in Toulouse, France that exploded on September 21, 2001, killing 30 people and leaving 2,500 with serious injuries. Frederic Arrou, chairman of the Association of Victims of September 21, told the *Times* that at Buncefield “an explosion of this importance obviously makes me think of what happened in Toulouse.” He added, “The fact is that ordinary people are kept in the dark and never told about the risks of living near a place like this. In

France, at least, we are treated like children.”

The cause of the Toulouse blast has never been properly established, but Total has claimed that an electrical spark may have been the reason.

The immediate cause of the Buncefield fire remains uncertain, but the “electrical spark” theory has also surfaced with the media blaming a tanker truck driver for turning on a switch nearby and igniting escaping vapour. However, if there was a large enough leak to reach the truck, it probably would have reached another ignition source sooner or later because fuel vapour is heavier than air and stays on the ground.

Drivers refuelling on site say that a storage tank was leaking just prior to the blast. According to one driver employed by Total at Buncefield, “I saw smoke and vapours escaping from the storage tank another driver was about to load from. I have only worked here for six months so I didn’t know if it was dangerous, so I asked some Tesco drivers who were also waiting to load what they thought. They walked over to the office to report the circumstances and suddenly the tank exploded.”

Hertfordshire Fire Service’s deputy chief Mark Yates stated that escaping petroleum vapour was the most likely cause of the original explosion and fire. Local residents also reported a strong smell of fuel near the entrance on several occasions and claimed to see foam running onto the road near the depot and into nearby fields, suggesting some cleaning-up exercises may have taken place.

There are reports that the two seriously injured workers were part of a maintenance crew working on a vapour recovery unit. This is significant as an important finding from the Flixborough inquiry was the lack of supervision of maintenance workers. Despite this, safety experts told the BBC that a “weekend effect” in industry still exists involving unsafe maintenance work on Saturdays and Sundays. An additional question is: if there was a fuel leak did the detection system pick it up?

Total denies there were any leaks in the run-up to the explosions. According to the government, the site was also subject to an audit just three months previously by the HSE. Justin McCracken, deputy chief executive of the organization, said that “the last inspection was specifically focusing on issues of preparation for dealing with fire” and “nothing came out which caused us undue concern.”

Buncefield was built in 1968 primarily to provide aviation fuel for Heathrow airport and was situated on the outskirts of Hemel Hempstead, a new town that was largely completed by then. However, the depot has since expanded into a major distribution by the addition of pipelines bringing fuel in from the Humber and Merseyside and taking it to Luton and Gatwick airports, which have mushroomed in size in the last three decades. Over the same period, as the price of land has rocketed, particularly in the southeast of England, the commercial zones of the town have expanded and developers have squeezed in housing estates dangerously close to the storage tanks, loaded with highly flammable fuel.

According to one resident who spoke to the press, the local Dacorum Council’s “greed and corruption” are “to blame for allowing development right up to the edge of the site.” He claims the council were involved in a “debacle” with a local property developer in the 1980s who had “to pay out £550,000 ten years later to underpin, plate the floors and actually put some bolts to hold the floor to ceiling windows” in houses on the Woodhall Farm estate facing Buncefield.

The HSE seeks to justify the close proximity of housing and workplaces to the oil depot, stating, “The UK is a small, densely populated island and such undeveloped areas as do exist are often so remote or of such environmental value as to be unsuitable for industrial use. It also remains the case that, to be economically viable, industries need to be sited where they are accessible to main transport routes and to sources of labour.” It asserts, “A balance has to be struck between the needs of industry, the needs of the community and the interests of safety.”

An unnamed environmental protection expert told the *Independent on Sunday* that “there were serious flaws in the design of Buncefield that

contributed to the intensity of the disaster.” He claimed that the site was too crowded with fuel tanks grouped three or four to a bund (a retaining wall intended to prevent the spread of spillages), whereas in most of Europe sites rarely have more than two tanks to a bund.

Sources in the EA have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the bunds were designed to prevent oil spills, but were never properly tested to cope with an explosion that might involve the use of millions of gallons of firewater that could spill over the bunds and flood the site.

Jeff Charlton, a disaster consultant of Disaster Advice Limited, told the media that the bunds were designed to hold the oil tank contents and a firewater lagoon located at the depot can hold 1.4 million litres of water—sufficient to soak all the tanks for a period of 40 minutes. However, the fire lasted for four days and Charlton points out that the firefighters used 15 million litres of water and 250,000 litres of foaming agent, flooding the reservoir and contaminating the site. “As the priority was to extinguish the fire, any consequence may have been felt to be acceptable,” he added.

The resulting pollution could threaten river and groundwater supplies and contaminate the soil. On December 12, the EA said that the firewaters, combined with oil and petrol, could have a severe impact on surface and ground water quality and aquatic life and that it was working with the fire service “to ensure measures are taken to avoid this situation—with runoff being collected in bunds around the site and pumped to on site storage areas.”

An EA press officer has told the *World Socialist Web Site* that in fact 24 million litres of fuel, firewater and foam were produced. It has been transported off site and the majority is still being held in tanks at Maple Lodge wastewater treatment works, pending a decision on its future disposal.

There are serious problems associated with the disposal of the fire water and foam, especially in such large quantities, because the foam can knock out the treatment processes and cause the foam and raw sewage to be discharged into the river. Downstream of the Maple Lodge treatment works lay abstraction points that draw water from the River Thames to supply London with its drinking water.

Although scientists have developed better foam concentrates over the years to reduce their environmental impact, they still contain surfactants (the active ingredient in most detergents), solvents such as glycols used in antifreeze and various additives (metals, dyes and preservatives) to improve their effectiveness in extinguishing flames. One key ingredient, a surfactant called PFOS, is now known to be toxic to aquatic life and builds up in the blood of animals and humans. Although the production of PFOS was recently stopped, there are still stocks of the old materials around. Many of the modern foam concentrates have new formulations, but their toxicity and persistency in the environment are unknown and still being investigated.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has accused Hertfordshire Fire Brigade of not having enough foam to deal with the fire. It said, “The brigade has no policy or planning for dealing with any major incident requiring foam. It has no specialist foam vehicles and no large stocks of foam. There are no officers with specialist training to deal with a major oil fire.”

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack also pointed out that two local fire stations are threatened with closure, and commented, “Many other brigades are facing threats of significant cuts and station closures. Hertfordshire county council cannot cut their fire service on the basis there will always be others who can help.”

The Hertfordshire planning authorities and Fire Brigade have borne the brunt of the criticism for the fire disaster and the oil companies seem to have escaped unscathed. However, it is the depot owners and management who are ultimately responsible for the safety of the site and prevention of accidents. Despite the size and importance of the site there does not appear to have been sufficient functional firefighting equipment at

Buncefield or trained firefighting crews provided by the oil company.



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