

Local residents speak on Welsh mining tragedy

Our reporters
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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to local residents in the village of Rhos and the nearby town of Pontardawe, South Wales.

Rhos is close to the privately owned Gleision drift mine, where four miners were killed on September 15. Phillip Hill, 45, Garry Jenkins, 39, David Powell, 50, and Charles Breslin, 62, died when the pit was flooded, engulfing the mine's shaft about 300 feet underground.

Some of the residents who spoke to the team were visibly shocked and traumatised by the events.

Paul Maguire is a cab driver and was employed for years in the coal industry. He said, "I worked over there [at the Gleision mine]. I did a stint up there, but it was too wet. It was atrocious conditions. I finished working underground about 20 years ago, but I worked in private mines all over the valleys for 50 odd years.

"I started off with British coal before I went into private mining. To be honest with you, I can't understand how they were allowed to work close to old workings. I knew exactly what had happened when I heard. I think there's a bit of negligence gone on somewhere.

"I worked next to old workings. I've even bored a hole in the coal, and when you see water coming through, you don't go firing it up. It's borderline with old workings. You know when you're close, and if you're too close you just go away."

Asked whether the economic climate had resulted in miners accepting harsh conditions, he agreed. "There's not much work about for experienced miners, and they try and get what work they can," he said. "My take on that particular mine is that it should not have been open. It was condemned in 2008, and it should have stayed that way."

The team told Maguire that last year the mine had passed its safety test. "I don't know who passed what, but they should never have been allowed to work near old workings

and fire coal up," he replied. "But the value of coal is going all the time. There's loads of coal there. With the price of gas and electric going up, coal is also going up in price. There is a load of drift mines about the place chucking it out."

Jason Long is a welder, employed at the Pembroke power station. His father had worked in the mining industry for about 40 years. "I knew David Powell, one of the miners who died," he said. "I also knew Charlie Breslin, who died. He had only been working there a few months and was about to retire. I was cut quite deep. It's very tragic what has happened."

In Pontardawe, the team spoke to **Ann Guy** who is from a mining family and is employed in a local supermarket. She said, "There should be better working conditions for men who work underground."

Her father had once been trapped underground and broke his pelvis. "You would hear as a child that some men were trapped underground, and there was no hope of getting them out", she said. "As Gleision had been derelict for a number of years, it should have really been checked before anyone went down there again."

"With the main breadwinner gone, it's just survival for the families that are left behind. The government should be giving them more support. There's nothing coming to the village anymore. Unemployment is high. My son is unemployed now, and he's 23. He's done two years as a mechanic. He can't seem to get a place to finish his apprentice.... Meanwhile, the government doesn't seem to do enough to penalise the banks, and they took all the tax payers' money."

Jan is a local college tutor. She said, "I understand the mine had a history of problems. From what people were saying, the anthracite they were getting out of there was top grade stuff, so it made it viable to do it.

“I’m not from a mining family. I had a nephew who did go down the mines, but only for about a year, and then he moved out of the area. But it’s a mining community, and everyone’s father and uncle or whatever historically worked down the mines. So you always know somebody who had a connection with mining.

“As a youngster, I grew up with Abernant [a coal mine employing hundreds of miners that closed in 1988] up the road. Everybody worked in Abernant. When I was a youngster, everyone you knew worked at Abernant. It was the main colliery.”

Asked if any jobs had replaced those jobs lost in the mining industry, she replied, “Good question. It’s like anywhere else in the country. There’s not that many jobs around, and you’ve got high numbers chasing what jobs there are. It doesn’t matter what industry you work in or whatever. I’m in education, and it’s not what you would term as secure. Twenty or 30 years ago, you would be looking at a job for life.

“If you think about the conditions they are getting the coal out in, they are literally using picks and shovels. As I understand it, the mine wasn’t big enough to get the equipment in anyway, so they were doing it the ‘old fashioned way’ on their bare knees, with pick and shovel. The big mining operations have gone, and there are still these small ones.

“But it’s only when something like this happens that it really hits home exactly what is going on.”

Michael Eustace lives in Pontardawe and works as a medical engineer in Swansea. “The deaths have affected the community,” he said. “My daughter is in school with a young lad, and his stepdad was one of the ones killed, I think. It’s a mining area, and it’s brought a cloud over it. For many, many years, we haven’t had anything like this.

“Personally, I think mines like that should be closed down. The health and safety aspect has just gone out of the window, hasn’t it? I spoke to a chap yesterday, and he used to work in Abernant. He was saying they used to have to leave a gap of 50 metres between where they were working underground and any old mine workings.

“At Gleision, they either didn’t map it out properly or they were breaking the rules. I think Neath Port Talbot Council have got a lot to answer for, for giving them the planning permission to work it. It’s a tough job mining, and they deserve a certain level of health and safety, I believe, and they didn’t get that. Those miners didn’t have a chance did they? There should be a proper investigation over this.

“I’ve got an uncle who died of emphysema, and he was working down the pits, too. We thought those days were

behind us. I was working with a chap at a different hospital up until six months ago, and he needs two new knees and he puts it down to the damp conditions. He was on his knees working at the Abernant pit. He was telling me about the state of the health and safety in the private pits and that they should never have allowed them to open.

“Once the [1984-1985] miners’ strike was over, I think the writing was on the wall for a lot of the mines. It was a difficult industry, and I think a lot of people were glad to see the back of it too because so many problems came from it. You had a situation where everyone worked in one industry, and then when a pit closed, you would always have lots of people losing their jobs all at once.”

Paul Cummings from nearby Leith is a bus driver. “I watched it on the news on the night it happened. I was thinking about it all night long. I got up the next day, and the first thing I did was put the TV on and watched it again. It was a terrible tragedy,” he said.

Annette Williams from Rhos owns a local beauty salon. “It’s terrible. I’m really saddened for everybody’s loss”, she said. “They’ve been doing this sort of work for years, and it’s just the law of averages.”

Kim Williams, Emily Williams and **Richard Topley** are school pupils.

Emily said, “The stepdad of one of my friends was one of those who died, Garry Jenkins. They should ban people from going in these mines because loads of people have died now. I think there should be more jobs for people our age. That way people wouldn’t have to go down the mines because their children would be earning more money as well.”

Richard said, “I think if they have to work down there, it should be for a restricted time. I think they should also use more machinery to make it safe”.

Kim said, “I think they should just ban such mining because it’s not really safe.”



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