

# The Welsh mining tragedy and the return to Dickensian-style exploitation

Robert Stevens, Julie Hyland  
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Almost two weeks on from the tragic deaths of four miners at the private Gleision colliery in the Swansea Valley, Wales, investigators from the police and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) continue to claim it is too early to determine its cause. The aim of this obfuscation is to cover over the revival of Dickensian-style exploitation as a consequence of the dismantling of the past social gains of the working class across Britain.

Charles Breslin, 62, David Powell, 50, Garry Jenkins, 39, and Phillip Hill, 45 were killed on September 15 when a retaining wall holding back a body of water underground failed, flooding the tunnel where they were working.

Drift mines are known to be especially hazardous and Gleision is no exception. Cut into the side of a hill, it is considered a death trap locally. The four experienced miners, among just a handful of workers employed at the pit, were working in extremely confined spaces, using explosives and shovels to dig out the coal.

In the most direct sense, their deaths are the result of the betrayal and defeat of the year-long 1984-85 miners' strike and the subsequent closures and privatisation of what remained of the coal industry.

But the super-exploitation of the Gleision miners and the brazen disregard for their safety has a resonance beyond South Wales and the mining industry. It speaks to some three decades in which the social conditions and living standards of working people in Britain have been gutted.

South Wales was once one of the world's most important coal mining regions. In 1913, it accounted for one-third of the world's coal exports, employing 232,000 miners in 620 collieries. This was the era of private mining in the UK, which saw miners regularly killed and maimed in disasters. Between 1851 and 1920, there were 48 disasters in the South Wales coalfield and 3,000 deaths. The most deadly disaster was at the Universal

colliery in Senghenydd in 1913, in which 439 men were killed.

Following the nationalisation of the coal industry after the World War Two, mining in the UK became much safer. A self-confident working class fought and won entitlement to holiday and sick pay, although wages continued to be held down, leading to repeated strikes. In February 1974, the Conservative government of Edward Heath was brought down by a national miners' strike.

It was in order to inflict a defeat on the most militant sections of workers in Britain that the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in 1984 set out to provoke a strike. Its announced plans to close 20 pits were, as the miners knew, only the spearhead of a drive to dismantle the mining industry.

Thatcher counted on the cowardice and perfidy of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to push through her closure plan. Throughout the strike, they refused to mount any struggle in defence of the miners. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) opposed all official secondary supportive strike action, while Labour leader Neil Kinnock denounced picket line "violence."

This betrayal was facilitated by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and its then-president, Arthur Scargill. Instead of leading a fight against this treachery, Scargill wrote a secret letter to the TUC stating, "No request is being made by this union for the intervention or assistance of the TUC."

This was part and parcel of Scargill's nationalist program and his refusal to call for a political offensive of the working class to bring down the Thatcher government and replace it with a genuine workers' government based on socialist policies.

In the wake of the miners' defeat, the Conservative government picked off other sections of the working class, one by one. Today the NUM has been reduced to a paper membership of just 1,700 members.

Apart from the generation of workers who passed through this struggle, many others are unaware of these experiences. This is not simply due to the lapse of 25 years.

For the Labour Party and the TUC, the miners' defeat provided the occasion for a wholesale renunciation of its old policies of social reformism and any notion of class solidarity. "New Labour" was launched under Tony Blair as an avowed party of big business, in no significant way different from the Conservatives, while then-TUC leader John Monks declared, "The days when trade unions provided an adversarial opposition force are past."

This transformation of the Labour Party and TUC into the direct tools of the financial oligarchy and corporate management was the political response of the labour bureaucracy to the competitive weakness of British capitalism on the world market. The ruling elite set out to resolve its crisis through deindustrialisation and the gutting of social provision so as to facilitate ever greater financial speculation. In doing so, it relied on the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to discipline the working class and sabotage any opposition.

Consequently, year on year, the number of days lost through industrial action reached a new low while former industrial heartlands, such as Wales, were turned into wastelands, blighted by high unemployment and poverty.

According to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, in Rhyl West Two, Denbighshire, more than half of working-age people (56 percent) rely on social benefits to survive. The county of Merthyr Tydfil—once a centre of radical and socialist agitation—now figures in the top 10 percent of the most deprived areas nationally.

Some 14 percent of children in Wales live in severe poverty—defined as an income of £7,000 for one parent and one child, and less than £12,500 for a couple with two children. In the district of Neath Port Talbot, the area that includes the Gleision mine and the Port Talbot Steel Works, 4,000 children live in severe poverty.

These are the circumstances that forced men like Breslin, Powell, Jenkins and Hill to work in such hazardous conditions. By all accounts, the Gleision colliery was only recently reopened for the extraction of its valuable anthracite coal, a commodity whose price has risen by around a third over the past three years. The drive for profit was worth more than these men's lives.

The same conditions of social deprivation and industrial exploitation are replicated across the country.

In April 2006, steelworker Kevin Downey, 49, was killed after falling into a channel of 1,400 degrees

Centigrade molten metal at the Port Talbot Steel Works. Downey was first blinded by steam at a blast furnace at the plant, causing him to stumble and fall into the molten metal.

At an inquest this month, Downey's death was ruled to be "accidental" despite the fact that the furnace was not protected by any safety barriers. In 2001, three other workers, Stephen Galsworthy, 25, Andrew Hutin, 20, and Len Radford, 53, were killed and 12 injured in an explosion at the same plant.

Last month, James Dennis Kay, a 62-year-old agency worker, was killed at a plant in Merseyside owned by Sonae, the Portuguese chipboard manufacturer, while demolishing a section of the factory damaged by fire.

Kay's death followed the fatalities in December of Thomas Elmer, 27, and James Bibby, 24, at the same plant, after they were dragged into a giant silo. In the last decade, Sonae was the target of four previous health and safety inquiries, for which it paid just £132,000 in fines.

Such tragedies will only increase as a consequence of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's austerity measures. These include cuts in the HSE budget by 35 percent, an end to automatic inspections in "medium- and low-risk" industries, and the confining of reports on workplace injuries to those requiring more than one week off work.

It is inevitable that workers will turn once again to building new organisations of class struggle to defend themselves. These will inexorably come into collision with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The success of this struggle depends on workers adopting an international and socialist perspective based on an irreconcilable struggle against the capitalist system and its political defenders.

Robert Stevens and Julie Hyland

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