

North Yorkshire residents speak on mining conditions

“If we challenge the health and safety then we are seen as stopping the job”

Our reporters
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At the weekend, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to people in Knottingley, North Yorkshire—the town adjoining the Kellingley colliery where the latest tragic mining fatality occurred.

David Rayne, a former stone mason and bricklayer who comes from a mining family, told the WSWS, “It’s all wrong. There are less miners than there’s ever been and more deaths—and it’s getting covered over.”

Referring to the killing of four miners’ at Gleision colliery—a small drift mine in Wales—on September 15, Rayne said, “What happened in Wales—that’s from Dick’s [Dickens] days. It’s conditions from before the Victorian era. The pictures of the mine showed you wooden props still being used! We replaced them with steel props in the 1950s, I think. There were all the strikes in the 1950s and ’60s about it and they were saying they were unsafe then.

“I think it’s getting worse across the whole country. We need the youth to have jobs and be working. The youth of today is us tomorrow.”

Rayne spoke of the contempt with which the Labour Party is held in the area. “They are hated around here”, he said, “especially Yvette Cooper [the local MP] and Ed Balls [the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labour leadership and Cooper’s husband].”

Emma, a housewife, spoke to the WSWS, “It’s got to stop. There are far too many deaths. Now is the time to do it—because there have been so many.”

“It’s not just the people who are killed—it’s the families ... the people left suffering. They all get forgotten about,” she said.

Mr. Hayward, a retired engineer, spoke of the long exploitation of the miners under capitalism: “This has been going on for 30 years ... in fact, probably 300 years now. You used to have little kids in the coal mines, such as in the Great Orme in Llandudno [north Wales]—a copper mine, where children used to be sent to work to extract copper.”

Hayward spoke disparagingly of media attempts to belittle

the mining deaths at Kellingley and Gleision: “They’ll only compare it to other industries where it’s just as dangerous ... or road accidents and so on.

“The only thing is if there were to be a strike down there. It’s good to see people are thinking and talking about these things now.”

Faye, 19, a sales assistant, whose father and grandfather were both miners, spoke of first hearing of the Kellingley death: “It was quite shocking—you don’t expect it to happen right on your doorstep.”

Faye spoke of the pressure of unemployment. “It is hard to find a job these days. I was out of work for a year. I had to go back to college.” But, she said, it’s becoming increasingly difficult for young people to gain university places or employment. “There is so much competition now. Even if you’ve got high grades, they won’t accept you ... it’s only if you’ve got money that you get through now.”

Many local residents who spoke to the WSWS came from three or four generations of miners. Irene Hargreaves, 87, told of her grandfather who worked at Fryston colliery, which was closed in 1985 following the year-long national miners’ strike. He was born in 1855, left school around the age of 12 years to work down the pit and died in 1947.

Hargreaves has lived in Knottingley since she was eight years old. “My grandfather was a miner and most of his sons were miners,” she said. “When we lived with my grandfather there were no baths. When he came home we used to have to pick the coal off his back.”

Speaking about the deaths at Kellingley and Wales, Hargreaves said, “The thing that this reignites is so much hatred. We are living in a world where it’s all about money. I worked from 14 years old until 61. I really fear for the young ones.”

Steve Langley said, “Most of my family have worked down the pits. They cut corners to save money. It’s the government’s fault. This affects people in every walk of life, not just the pits, but everywhere. In Leeds, the taxis were

inspected and for every 100 examined, 70 were taken off the road. It's all down to profit and loss, while the working class is getting done to death.

"I used to work in the sewing industry as an engineer until I had an accident. A sewing machine fell on me and hit me on my shoulder so I now have paralysis in my right arm. It severed the tendons in my arm and now I have not got the use of my fingers. The solicitors weren't able to prove the company wrong.

"I lived next to the pit overlooking the works. When there is a methane gas release, an alarm goes and they come and tell us to close our windows. When the chemical works were here up until three years ago they made all kinds of deadly chemicals like TNT. A young lad was killed there just before it closed.

"Not long before it closed a cloud of sulphuric acid was released. Fortunately it blew away but if it had rained it would have been a disaster.

"I recently spoke to Yvette Cooper our MP and told her that the only person worth voting for is Guy Fawkes [executed for trying to blow up parliament in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605]. The whole system is rotten."

Nicholas Scarce, unemployed, said, "This accident shouldn't have happened. The amount of years the mines have been going they should be safe by now. No lessons are learnt. Money is all that this world's bothered about. It's all about greed.

"The miners are there to make a living whereas the ones who sit on their backsides are making triple that. Changes need to happen. It's time people took responsibility for their own actions and had a greater say in what happens."

Mrs. Webster said, "Me and my husband commented the night the accident happened that there seems to have been more accidents since the pit has been privatised.

"I think there's a lot of things involved. There are agency workers and the unions aren't dealing or looking after the workers.

"The government wants people educated and to have opinions, but then don't like what they have to say.

"I work as a school cleaner and people who are working are getting clobbered. I feel that these big firms are making a lot of money and not sharing the wealth about, as everyone is on minimum wages."

Stewart Merchant worked as a contractor on the coal preparation plant at Kellingley. He told the WSWS, "The health and safety they have down there doesn't comply with what they say they are doing. The management say if you don't do it then you are going down the road.

"There is no proper scaffolding to use. I've seen pitmen walking across girders to put straps down to put the block and tackle up. All they say is if you don't do it, because

you're a contractor they'll get rid of you.

"They get blokes to sign a method statement and once they've done it they say everyone has got to do it. When they are challenged on health and safety issues they say, 'Get on with it' or at the annual health and safety meetings they will 'look into it', but never do.

"The block and tackles should be returned to the cage and checked, but blokes end up keeping them on them so they can make sure they have one.

"I can say one thing about the power stations; they wouldn't allow such practices and you would be kicked off the site. I have worked at Ferrybridge [fed coal by Kellingley colliery] and they say that it is OK to do things as long as the health and safety is safe.

"At the end of the day it all boils down to money. If we challenge the health and safety then we are seen as stopping the job."

Susan Wagstaff, a catering assistant, said, "I used to live outside Kellingley pit in the row of cottages there. It's only 12 months since it was on fire down there. We weren't told officially. I only found out when they did an explosion down there whilst we were in bed and we felt the house shaking. Only later someone who works there told me what had happened.

"There were 15 houses there but they didn't tell us it was on fire. There have been three deaths in three years. They ought to be sorting the health and safety out there.

"All these managers are getting paid bonuses. They're not interested, but they're getting billions. The whole thing stinks as long as they are alright."

Gareth Baldwin works in a warehouse: "Another life has gone for no reason. My mate works on the rescue team there. He led the emergency services down to them [the trapped miners]. You have to be quite qualified to do that job in the pits. Everything we do now is for profits."



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