

Britain: Vast cover-up of Hillsborough football disaster

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More evidence has emerged of the vast scale of the cover-up of the April 15, 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster in Sheffield, England, which led to the deaths of 96 supporters of Liverpool Football Club.

Last week the Hillsborough Independent Panel issued a report proving that the deaths were entirely the result of corporate, police and emergency services negligence. This refuted the mountain of lies and fabrications that began being circulated by the authorities and a pliant media even as the tragedy unfolded, aimed at blaming the supporters themselves for the crush which led to the fatalities.

This cover-up extended to the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and was continued by successive Conservative and Labour governments. To this day, the individuals and authorities responsible for the deaths of 96 people, including the South Yorkshire Police (SYP), Sheffield Wednesday Football Club, their primary safety consultants Eastwood & Partners, Sheffield City Council, and the Football Association (FA), have never been held to account.

The FA selected the Hillsborough ground for the semi-final, despite it not having a valid safety certificate and two previous incidents when the games had to be delayed due to crowd congestion.

No police officer has ever even been disciplined as a result of the disaster, even though it was the police decision to open an egress gate (Gate C) and direct supporters into already dangerously overcrowded terrace “pens” that was the central factor in the fatalities.

The cover-up has lasted so long that the most senior police officer involved, Peter Wright, chief constable of South Yorkshire Police from 1983 to 1990 and in charge of operations that fateful day, died last year, aged 82.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has played its now all too familiar role. In 1998 senior CPS lawyers were handed a detailed analysis of the police cover-up, but decided to take no action against any police officers involved.

The families and their supporters are demanding those responsible are finally brought to justice. Charles Falconer QC, said the DPP (Director of Public Prosecutions) should now investigate charging Sheffield Wednesday, as well as South Yorkshire police, Sheffield City Council and the Football Association, with corporate manslaughter.

That this process has taken more than two decades reveals the absence of any democratic accountability in Britain. What happened at Hillsborough and its aftermath can only be understood in the context of the offensive against the working class pursued by successive governments over more than three decades.

In 1979 the Thatcher government came to power pledged to “roll back the frontiers of state” and the ending of “lame duck” industries. In 1981 thousands of youth rioted in major cities in opposition to police brutality, spiralling unemployment and poverty. Wright, then the deputy chief constable of Merseyside Police, played a key role in putting down the youth rebellion in Liverpool. For the first time in mainland Britain, CS tear gas was used against rioters by Merseyside Police. Wright also threatened the use of rubber bullets.

As the Tory government took on the working class—most notably in the steel, mining and printing industries—it sought to establish a more overtly political police force, taking instruction directly from government. One of the first acts of the incoming Thatcher government was a 45 percent pay increase awarded to the police.

During the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85, the full force of the state was brought to bear to defeat the miners. Some 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, and two killed on picket lines. The South Yorkshire Police played a key role throughout. Wright joined the SYP in 1983 and led it during the miners' strike. A Freedom of Information Act request obtained by the BBC in 2009 revealed that Wright personally authorised a secret investigation of National Union of Mineworkers leader Arthur Scargill.

These events took place just four years before the Hillsborough disaster. Immediately following it, Wright authorised a team of police to change 164 statements written by police officers on duty at Hillsborough. Fully 116 statements were later amended to "remove or alter comments unfavourable" to SYP.

That the police were able to fabricate such lies, blaming innocent football supporters for the 96 deaths, could only happen because they were protected at the highest levels.

The same lies and worse were immediately circulated through the *Sun* newspaper blaming "drunken" Liverpool supporters for the disaster, who were accused of beating up and abusing police officers trying to rescue the injured and dying. The *Sun*, owned by multi-billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, was intimately associated with the Thatcher government's brutal assault on the working class.

It is only 23 years later that the names of those who were the source of these lies have been revealed. They were concocted by senior police officers and Irvine Patnick, then a right-wing Conservative Sheffield MP, and then disseminated through the newspaper.

Hillsborough was a precedent. In the subsequent decades every impediment to the vast accumulation of wealth by a tiny minority has been swept away, including basic democratic rights and safety regulations.

In the decades since Hillsborough, the police have continued to operate as a law unto themselves. They have been granted ever more repressive powers to the point where they have the ability to shoot to kill with impunity, as was demonstrated with the 2005 police execution of young Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes on the London Underground, the killing last year of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, north London, and

the execution of another young man, Anthony Grainger, in Culcheth, Cheshire, this year.

What took place at Hillsborough was corporate murder. The authorities were legally required to ensure the safety of the football supporters at such events. What transpired was due to a dereliction of these basic duties without precedent in British history.

The callous disregard of the football authorities towards the welfare of the overwhelmingly working class spectators who attended matches during that period was summed up Wednesday by Bert McGee, who was chairman of Sheffield at the time of the disaster. A serious crush occurred in 1981, in which 38 people were injured on the same Leppings Lane terrace where the Liverpool supporters later died. In response to the police having to move supporters from that section of the ground to avoid the real possibility of fatalities, McGee is quoted in the panel's report as stating: "Bollocks—no one would have been killed."

The Hillsborough Independent Panel detailed how nothing was done to remedy this life-threatening situation. Instead, the changes made to the ground in the aftermath were principally to build metal fences running up the Leppings Lane terrace to divide it into separate pens. One of the report's authors, Phil Scraton, noted that this made "a demonstrably unsafe terrace dangerous."



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