

BBC programme exposes 1984 police frame-up of striking miners

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“Inside Out”, broadcast on BBC One Monday night, alleges that 100 witness statements made by officers policing the miner’s mass picket of Orgreave coking plant on 18 June 1984 were fabricated. This was done in order that those arrested could be charged with the offence of Riot, which, if convicted could carry an automatic life sentence. Usually offences of this type are charged under a Public Order Act which can be dealt with by a fine.

The General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, Chris Kitchen, told the *Guardian*, “I will be asking the NUM’s National Executive to consider complaining to the IPCC [Independent Police Complaints Commission] and the DPP [Director of Public Prosecutions] for the police operations at Orgreave and elsewhere during the strike to be investigated, now the details of what the South Yorkshire Police did at Hillsborough have been revealed.”

The allegations come in the wake of the revelations made by the Hillsborough Committee’s independent report showing the responsibility of the South Yorkshire Police for the April 15, 1989 Hillsborough disaster.

At the Football Association semi-final at the Sheffield Wednesday football ground that day, 96 Liverpool supporters lost their lives when they were crushed to death as a result of the actions of the South Yorkshire Police.

The police had used horses to pen the fans into a confined area, where they were forced-up against the wire fencing and suffocated. Later the police were found to have manipulated their evidence in an attempt to cover-up their actions. These included leaks to the capitalist press claiming that Liverpool supporters had been drunk and had stolen from the dead and dying as

they lay stricken on the ground.

“Inside Out” presenter Dan Johnson asked if there was a connection between the false allegations made by the South Yorkshire Police then and similar allegations the same force employed against the Orgreave pickets five years earlier when 39 miners of the 93 arrested at Orgreave were charged with Riot.

The court case against the 39 collapsed after 16 weeks in 1985, when it was found that evidence had been fabricated. Labour MPs representing mining areas called for a public inquiry, as did the prominent civil rights lawyer Mike Mansfield, who had been defending three of the accused miners, and another of the defence solicitors, Gareth Peirce. But no inquiry was held and no police officer is understood to have been disciplined for anything arising out of Orgreave. Six years later, in June 1991, the 39 miners were paid £425,000 by South Yorkshire Police to settle a civil action.

Sheffield barrister Mark George QC explained that he had examined about 100 of the police statements obtained by the BBC. They reveal that several dozen contain exactly the same phrases, signifying “widespread collusion.” There was a parallel with the Hillsborough disaster, “where they [police] could set the agenda and nobody of any importance would challenge it”.

Vera Baird, a barrister at the time of Orgreave and Solicitor General in the last Labour government, first heard the claims when she was defending 15 of the 93 arrested there. She said, “You can see in a way that they were just trying to set the scenario, but actually what they were doing was ‘teeing up’, perverting the course of justice.”

One former police officer admitted that he had most of his statement narrated to him.

In 1984, Ian Hernon had been a political reporter and

described how every morning the press would be called to a news conference where the miners would be described as “yobbos”. Anybody who opposed Margaret Thatcher’s policies or those of the police were labelled as “the enemy within” by the Downing Street press corps and treated as a subversive force, he said.

Hernon, author of a book on the Riot Act entitled *Riot*, said it was a “blunt and heavy instrument” used to quell civil unrest. Before Orgreave the last time the Riot Act had been read was during the 1919 police strike in Liverpool, although it was most famously used during the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester where it was read to allow dragoons with sabres drawn to ride into a crowd of peaceful protesters.

Former NUM official at Bentley colliery, Dave Douglass, was the least serious of those interviewed. He claimed that in their excitement, each policeman had forgotten who they had arrested and so made up their witness statement as they went along. This explanation presents the police actions as some kind of Keystone Cops comedy and completely underplays the thought and preparation that the police had put into their Orgreave operation.

Mansfield described the South Yorkshire Police’s evidence as “the biggest frame up ever.” He is now acting for the Hillsborough Family Support Group, which has campaigned since the 1989 disaster for the South Yorkshire police officers responsible on the day and in the misinformation spread afterwards to be held accountable.

“South Yorkshire police operated a culture of fabricating evidence with impunity, which was not reformed after Orgreave, and allowed to continue to Hillsborough five years later,” Mansfield said. “The current investigations by the IPCC and DPP into the forces malpractices related to Hillsborough should include other malpractice by the same force at the time.”

Mansfield said that there is “no doubt” that the Thatcher government’s actions “were political” and that it “saw threats from the NUM as being subversive”. This led to “miscarriage of justice,” with not one police officer prosecuted or disciplined for what took place at Orgreave.

The furore over these critical questions has prompted the resignation of Sir Norman Bettison, the Chief

Constable of West Yorkshire Police. Bettison was an Inspector in the South Yorkshire Police at the time of Hillsborough and has come under severe criticism for some of his comments in defence of the police, including spreading lies about drunken Liverpool supporters.

On June 18 1984, British Steel’s coking plant at Orgreave was the scene of an orchestrated ambush by South Yorkshire Police, supported by police forces from around the country, against striking miners from pits across the UK. Over 5,000 police, some on horseback, others armed with riot shields, employed short shield snatch squads and military-type tactics to break up the mass picket line made up of young miners dressed only in jeans, T-shirts and trainers.

This was a state attack on the miners organised by the Thatcher government to break the strike as part of its strategy to impose savage attacks on the entire working class. NUM President Arthur Scargill and the NUM trade union bureaucracy helped isolate the miners by refusing to demand the TUC and Labour Party call a general strike and wage a struggle to expel the right-wing leaders who were colluding with the state offensive.

Instead, Scargill restricted the miners struggle to the bankrupt perspective of putting pressure on the Thatcher Tory government and forcing it to stand by the “Plan for Coal” protecting a regulated national industry. It was this national perspective that left the miners isolated and led to their defeat.



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