

Hillsborough inquest: Ninety-six UK football supporters unlawfully killed

Robert Stevens
28 April 2016

A full 27 years after the event, the inquest into the Hillsborough disaster concluded that 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters, crushed to death on April 15, 1989, were unlawfully killed.

The verdict in the longest jury case in British legal history vindicates the extraordinary campaign by the families, friends and supporters of those killed, injured and traumatized.

In the teeth of a state-organised cover-up, they vowed to bring those responsible for the deaths of their loved ones to justice. Their fight to reveal the truth in the face of a catalogue of lies concocted by the police, the Conservative government and the right-wing media is a testament to the principles of class solidarity and struggle against enormous odds. So determined were the families to get justice that some of them refused to accept a death certificate for their loved ones, after the original 1991 inquest recorded a verdict of “accidental death” for all 96.

Those killed were attending a match at Sheffield Wednesday’s Hillsborough football ground. Men, women and children were crushed to death after David Duckenfield, the police officer in command, gave the order to open Exit Gate C at 2.52 pm, just before the 3 pm kickoff. Hundreds of fans were directed into two already dangerously overcrowded “pens.” Many died in these pens, while others passed away after escaping onto the pitch. The youngest victim was just 10 years old and the oldest, 67. Thirty-seven were teenagers, most still at school. The victims included three pairs of brothers, two sisters and one father and son.

The verdict triggered an outburst of pent-up emotion. Relatives and supporters, many in tears, applauded the jury as it exited. Outside court they cheered. One of the Hillsborough campaigners, Trevor Hicks, who lost two daughters, Sarah and Vicki, responded, “I think if anyone is a winner today, it’s society at large in that, no matter who you are, how big you are, or where you are in your

organisation, the public will come after you if you do anything wrong.”

Margaret Aspinall, who lost her 18-year-old son James, said, “Let’s be honest about this—people were against us. We had the media against us, as well as the establishment. Everything was against us.”

In addition to the unlawful killing verdict, the jury concluded:

- A succession of police mistakes and omissions on the day amounted to “gross negligence.”

- Design, construction and safety certification of the stadium were defective, planning and signage were inadequate

- The emergency response from the police and ambulance services was delayed.

In coming to their verdict by a 7-2 majority, the jury answered 14 questions relating to the events in Sheffield. The jury threw out claims by police barristers that “drunken” Liverpool fans had contributed to the disaster. Part of a statement from the Hillsborough Justice Campaign (HJC) read, “We are also pleased that the jury has exonerated Liverpool supporters from being in any way to blame for the disaster. We put on record our disgust that the police once again used the coroner’s court as a vehicle for reiterating lies in respect of fans’ behaviour.”

The HJC demanded the “immediate removal of the current chief constable of South Yorkshire Police” and praised the jury verdict, made despite the evidence of police lies and their altered statements regarding the events not being presented to the inquest.

The 1991 inquest verdict was quashed, and new inquests were ordered following the publication of the

2012 findings of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, which reviewed 450,000 documents, including some previously confidential. It demolished the official version of events that had exonerated the police. The then Labour government only agreed to set up the panel in 2010 in the face of widespread public anger that not a single individual had been brought to justice.

Following the verdict, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron issued a statement saying it was “a landmark moment in the quest for justice. ... It is only due to their [the families] tireless bravery in pursuing the truth that we arrived at this momentous verdict.” In parliament Wednesday, Home Secretary Theresa May spoke of the “extraordinary dignity and determination” of the families.

This is truly staggering hypocrisy.

It was the hated government of Margaret Thatcher, so beloved of Cameron and May for carrying out an onslaught against working people, which was instrumental in ensuring the denial of any justice to the Hillsborough victims and their families. Thatcher’s successor, John Major, and the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, continued the cover-up.

While those that died were Liverpool supporters, what happened at Hillsborough was prepared in the coalfields and on the picket lines in South Yorkshire and throughout the UK.

Determined to take on the working class—most notably in the steel, mining and printing industries—the Tory government established a more overtly political police force taking instruction directly from government. The full force of the state was brought to bear against the year-long miners’ strike of 1984-85, during which 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, and two killed on picket lines.

Peter Wright, the chief constable of South Yorkshire Police from 1983 to 1990, led the force as it brutally attacked miners with impunity. He was responsible for overall policing at the Hillsborough football stadium on the day of the disaster. Taking their cue from the Thatcher government, the police treated working class football fans, like the miners before them, as “The enemy within.”

The Tories then played a central role in disseminating lies portraying Liverpool fans as responsible for the own deaths. Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, which cheered on the police as they battered the miners and then the print workers at Wapping in 1985-1986, printed its now infamous “The Truth” front page—claiming that Liverpool fans had “urinated on police officers” and “picked the pockets of the dead.”

These lies, as documented by the Hillsborough Independent Panel, were based on a local news agency report of a conversation with then Conservative MP for Sheffield Hallam, Irvine Patnick, and a senior police officer.

These lies were regurgitated by the *Spectator* magazine under the editorship of Boris Johnson, now Conservative Party Mayor of London, in 2004, in an editorial accusing Liverpudlians of wallowing in their “victim status” and “drunken fans” of “mindlessly [trying] to fight their way into the ground...”

In truth, the fans did everything they could to aid and assist dying supporters and the injured. In contrast, several police officers, as footage attests, impeded these attempts with the use of dogs and truncheons. A rank of police officers stood on the halfway line, watching the carnage unfold, doing nothing to assist.

The *Sun* responded to the historic verdict Wednesday by relegating it to page eight, while Murdoch’s *Times* initially failed to run it in the first edition front page.

Many of the guilty figures involved are either rotting in their graves, or nearing the end of life. Thatcher died in 2013, Irving Patnick in 2012 and Peter Wright in 2011. Thatcher’s Home Secretary at the time, Douglas Hurd, is 86. Duckenfield, now 71, took early retirement on a full pension so that he could escape disciplinary action.

The families of the 96 have demanded that all those responsible who can still be brought to justice face prosecution. The HJC called for the immediate removal of the current chief constable of South Yorkshire Police and “for all senior officers involved on the day to lose their pension rights with immediate effect.”

Workers and young people must support this call and any demands made for appropriate compensation, emulating the courageous approach of the Hillsborough families who acted throughout independently of the state and political establishment.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact