

Scandal deepens over Hillsborough disaster cover-up

Paul Mitchell
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Last week, a jury announced its decision that 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters, who died on April 15, 1989, were unlawfully killed. Following the verdict, Margaret Aspinall of the Hillsborough Family Support Group told 20,000 people gathered in Liverpool, “Let’s hope that’s only the beginning of what’s going to be done. Because all you, like all of us, have had 27 years of sleepless nights. Let’s hope they’re getting theirs now. It starts from now.”

Aspinall has got her wish. The exposure of the 27-year cover-up of the Hillsborough disaster has rocked the British establishment.

The 96 men, women and children were crushed to death at Sheffield Wednesday’s Hillsborough football ground after former Chief Supt. David Duckenfield ordered an exit gate to two already dangerously overcrowded pens to be opened—allowing in hundreds of more fans. Duckenfield retired on a full pension to escape disciplinary action.

The jury said “errors” and “omissions” by top police officers and Sheffield Wednesday officials were to blame for the tragedy and not the fans. It also cited problems in the design and safety of the stadium.

The verdict was a vindication of the campaign waged by the families, friends and supporters of those killed and injured. Without their efforts the facts behind the Hillsborough tragedy would have remained buried. For almost three decades, they fought a web of lies, half-truths and slander by the entire state apparatus—the police, legal system, Conservative and Labour governments and the press.

Emotional tributes involving hundreds of thousands took place at football grounds over the weekend.

Solicitors for the Hillsborough families announced that they would be suing the South Yorkshire police for “abuse on an industrial scale” and for the “cover-up and actions intended to wrongly blame the deceased and

Liverpool Football Club supporters for the tragedy, for which there has still been no proper admission or apology.”

The families are also pursuing action against the West Midlands police, who claimed they had carried out an independent investigation. In fact, scores of statements by football fans were doctored, more than 230 police statements were changed and radio orders were deleted.

There were calls for Conservative Party Home Secretary Theresa May to carry out a “root-and-branch” investigation into the “shambles” at the South Yorkshire police, and for it to be placed under “remedial measures” or disbanded altogether.

Following the inquest verdict, the Hillsborough Justice Campaign demanded the “immediate removal” of South Yorkshire Police chief constable David Crompton for renegeing on an apology he had made in 2012. Crompton was forced to resign.

It only took another 24 hours before his replacement, former assistant chief constable at the Greater Manchester Police (GMP), Dawn Copley, was made to resign as well. This came after it was revealed that she was involved in an investigation by Kent police into senior GMP officers accused of “corrupt practice”—a fact known by her appointee, Labour Party South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner, Alan Billings.

The fallout from the Hillsborough inquest has also enveloped Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) director Alison Saunders, the most senior public prosecutor in England and Wales. Saunders is now under pressure for dismissal of evidence relating to a Hillsborough casualty in 1996. At the time, Saunders was an adviser to Attorney-General Sir Nicholas Lyell, chief legal adviser to John Major’s Conservative government, who sought a “gagging order” to prevent the disclosure of secret arms sales to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the notorious Matrix Churchill scandal.

Documents show Saunders decided there was “no reason” to reopen the Hillsborough case, and “nothing which makes a fresh inquest necessary or in the interests of justice.”

The Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron, heirs to the toxic legacy of Hillsborough, is attempting a damage limitation exercise. It is determined to protect the police at any cost, as it has done by delaying the second part of the Leveson Inquiry into phone hacking allegations by Rupert Murdoch’s media and its corrupt relations with the police.

May told the parliament, “The jury’s findings do not, of course, amount to a finding of criminal liability, and no one should impute criminal liability to anyone while the ongoing investigations are still pending”—a reference to a case before the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) and a second criminal investigation, Operation Resolve.

May sought to keep any future actions of the Hillsborough families within official channels by declaring that the government would “support the families in their quest for justice” and would continue funding the family forums—chaired by May’s adviser, Bishop James Jones—which officials from the CPS, Operation Resolve and the IPCC attend.

The bogus nature of such “support” was underscored by the remarks of IPCC deputy chairperson, Rachel Cerfontyne. Three decades after the disaster and countless investigations, Cerfontyne issued a few inane and naïve comments about Hillsborough that any police complaints authority worth their salt would have concluded years ago. She asked the blindingly obvious question, “If there were controlling minds, who were those controlling minds? Was there collusion amongst controlling minds? If officers had their statements changed, what role did they play in that? Were they aware of that? Who was instructing that?”

“The key theme for us is the aftermath, was there a cover-up, what sort of cover-up, who was involved, and part of looking at that is who might be motivated to do what, what people’s interests were.”

Cerfontyne speaks as if all of this is a mystery. The interests involved were revealed by Rick Naylor, a police officer at Hillsborough and secretary of the South Yorkshire branch of the National Association of Retired Police Officers. The day after the inquest verdict, he felt confident enough to post a message on the association’s web site telling his members to be proud of their service in spite of the outcome of the Hillsborough inquest. He

said they had to “remain dignified amongst all the bile and hatred directed towards South Yorkshire Police.”

“I am extremely proud to be an ex-South Yorkshire cop and I will hold my head up. South Yorkshire Police faced immense challenges in the 1980s—the steel strike, the miners’ dispute and Hillsborough, and along the way we caught the Yorkshire Ripper!”

Naylor is referring to the crucial role South Yorkshire police played in the onslaught carried out by the hated government of Margaret Thatcher. What happened at Hillsborough was prepared in the steel and mining areas and on the picket lines in South Yorkshire by the systematic violence employed by the police against working people.

May is presently considering what to do about another IPCC report into police actions at the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire. As many as 8,000 riot police, including mounted officers and dog units, were deployed brutally against around 6,000 striking miners. Ninety-five pickets were charged with various offences, but their trials collapsed in 1987 as a result of fabricated evidence, police assault, unlawful arrest and malicious prosecution. South Yorkshire Police were forced to pay out over £500,000 to 39 pickets in an out-of-court settlement, but no one was disciplined. The IPCC report, parts of which are redacted, contains evidence of direct links between Orgreave and Hillsborough.

The Tories played a central role in disseminating lies portraying Liverpool fans as responsible for the own deaths, aided and abetted by Murdoch’s *The Sun* newspaper.

Before coming to power, Tony Blair had promised that Labour would institute a full-scale inquiry, but he failed to do this after winning the 1997 general election. The Labour government finally agreed to create the Hillsborough Independent Panel in 2010, only after being confronted by widespread anger at the fact that not a single individual had been brought to justice. It is the height of cynicism that Shadow Home Secretary Andy Burnham, a key minister in the Blair and Brown governments, now rails against the “flawed judicial system” and belatedly calls for prosecutions.



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