

UK: Forty-two years after Birmingham pub bombings, inquest to be reopened

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The city of Birmingham coroner has reopened the inquest into the deaths of 21 people killed in the November 1974 pub bombings in the city.

The bombings resulted in the torture, frame-up and jailing of six innocent men who became known as the Birmingham Six. Hugh Callaghan, Patrick Joseph Hill, Gerard Hunter, Richard McIlkenny, William Power and John Walker were jailed for life in 1975 and not released until 16 years later, in 1991, when their convictions were quashed as unsafe and unsatisfactory by the Court of Appeal.

After the reopening of the inquest, Hill, who has supported the campaign of the victims' families for justice, spoke out against the 42-year cover-up by the British establishment.

“For me the question that I want answered, and it’s the question I’ve been asking myself for 42 years, is who gave the orders for us to be the scapegoats, who gave the West Midlands Serious Crimes Squad the order to torture and frame innocent people?”

Hill says he was told by Birmingham police at the time, “Our orders are to get confessions, and convictions and we’re to use any means that we have to obtain them, don’t worry we’re covered all the way to the top.” He continued, “We will never get justice but I tell you one thing that we can get and that’s the one thing we deserve the most—the truth. It’s not so much me, I know the truth. I want this for the families.”

On the role of the police, Hill said, “I don’t think the Birmingham police could spell the word ‘truth,’ never mind tell it. They’re rotten.”

Hill said he believed the inquest would be “the first step on the road to hopefully getting a bit nearer the truth. Whether we will get the whole truth or not, I’m not sure. I’m very sceptical about that.”

The inquest is into the bombings themselves and their victims, rather than the frame-up. It was opened after new evidence emerged that the police were given two previous indications that an Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombing campaign was planned in Birmingham but did nothing. Further evidence—referred to by Ashley Underwood QC,

legal representative for some of the families but not disclosed to the public—points to the police having an informer within the IRA who gave them a direct warning of the plans, which was also ignored.

According to Louise Hunt, senior coroner for Birmingham and Solihull, the evidence is “significant and does raise concerns in relation to potential advanced notice.” West Midlands police have requested that the new evidence be kept secret.

Some have suggested the warnings were ignored to keep a British state agent from being discovered, but other motivations were also paramount. At the same time as the British state framed up the Birmingham Six, other innocent men and woman, who became known as the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven, were also framed up and convicted. As with the Birmingham Six, these followed bombings in pubs occurring in October 1974.

The British state benefited from these events, seizing upon them to justify the strengthening of the state apparatus for use against the working class. The Prevention of Terrorism Act was passed against the background of a crisis for the British state presented by a militant movement of the working class.

In February 1974, the Conservative government of Edward Heath had been brought down by a miners’ strike. A minority Labour government returned to power under Harold Wilson. A second election in October the same year increased Labour’s majority, but it was still forced to rely for support on the Liberals and nationalist parties.

There is ample evidence that elements of the British state during this period prepared for a military coup but ultimately were able to rely on Labour and the trade union bureaucracy to bring this movement under control.

It is against this background that the frame-up of the Birmingham Six unfolded.

On November 21, 1974, two bombs exploded in two different Birmingham pubs. A third was found and disabled before it went off. A short time later, transport police stopped five men of Irish origin. The men had taken the train

from Birmingham and were planning to board a ferry from Morecambe to Ireland. They were asked to take part in checks for explosives to rule them out of enquiries. Two of the tests proved positive due to their indiscriminate nature—probably the result of residues from playing cards.

Police from Birmingham, who travelled up to Morecambe, then used torture to extract false confessions. A sixth man, who had only met the others for a drink, was also arrested and treated similarly.

The six were subject to further brutal treatment when they arrived at Winsom Green prison in Birmingham to await trial.

When the six came to trial, all distanced themselves from the confessions, stating they had been brutally forced into signing them. The judge rejected this information and the confessions were allowed to be used as part of the prosecution case. The fact that the men had been beaten in prison was used to cover up for the even worse treatment they had previously received from the police to extract the confessions.

Before the jury considered their verdict, the judge made it clear what was expected of them—going as far as to denounce some of the defence witnesses and to state his view that the defendants were guilty.

Any inquest that separates the bombing and the resulting deaths from the subsequent frame-ups can only further the cover-up.

A host of questions must be answered including: Why did the police torture six innocent men into signing false confessions? Why was an incompetent forensics man used as an expert witness, and why were the six kept in jail even after he and his tests were discredited? Why did the police make no attempts to find other forensic evidence, such as traces of explosives on the men's clothing or in their homes? Who authorised the publication in the newspapers of material likely to prejudice the jury? Why did the judge allow the prosecution to use the confessions and ignore evidence they had extracted forcibly? Why were the six tried alongside a self-confessed member of the IRA when there was no connection between their cases? Why did the judge's prejudicial summing up not cause the collapse of the proceedings?

These questions lead to others. Was the state operation to jail the Birmingham Six—as Hill has maintained since his release—the result of a top-level decision to jail innocent men? If so, who took the decision and who knew about it?

To keep the six in jail, the authorities used the argument that if they were innocent, it would have required a widespread conspiracy.

In January 1980, Lord Denning, the then Master of the Rolls (the judge who presides over the Court of Appeal)

opposed an appeal by the Six. He said, “If they won, it would mean that the police were guilty of perjury; that they were guilty of violence and threats; that the confessions were involuntary and improperly admitted in evidence; and that the convictions were erroneous. ... That was such an appalling vista that every sensible person would say, ‘It cannot be right that these actions should go any further.’”

We now know that there was such a conspiracy, involving two police forces, the judiciary, the prison service and right-wing sections of the media.

The West Midlands police predictably tried to stop the inquest being reopened—opposing the decision of the coroner, claiming she was going outside her remit.

The *Daily Mail* gave voice to fears in the ruling elite of the danger that even the token inquest being organised could lead to further exposures of the role of the British state in the Birmingham bombings and its aftermath: “[T]hese hearings must not be side-tracked by attacks on police failings. Nor should they dwell on the wrongful imprisonment of the Birmingham Six, for which the bombings risk being chiefly remembered.”

Chris Mullin, the former Labour MP—and author of a book on the Birmingham Six, *Error of Judgement*—opposed the reopening of the inquest. He claimed this was because it was “40 years too late” and could not lead to the punishment of the real bombers.

Workers and youth must oppose this and all attempts to prevent the truth being established about the Birmingham bombings, the involvement of the state in this heinous crime and the frame-ups of six innocent people.

A wealth of information has recently come to light on how the British state infiltrated both sides of the sectarian divide as part of its decades-long dirty war in Northern Ireland—in which state informants regularly took part in atrocities aimed at widening the divisions in the working class and maintaining their own rule.



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