

# “This tragedy was avoidable” at UK Hawkeswood Metal recycling plant

Our reporter  
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*Manka is from the campaign for justice for the families of five workers killed by a wall collapse at Hawkeswood Metal recycling plant in Birmingham, in 2016.*

“On July 7, 2016, sometime around 8.00 to 8.30am, family and friends of the victims were calling each other about the accident at the recycling centre. We only knew that there had been some fatalities and one serious injury. Everyone made their way to the site to try and establish what had happened and who had been affected.

“This was the day after Eid. The community had just celebrated the end of fasting. Everyone converged on the site to found out who the victims were, but it took several days before the emergency services were able to recover all the bodies due to the severity of the accident. That was what happened on that fateful day.

“In Gambia, the way we are related is very extended. I found out that one of the victims—Saibo Sillah—was related to me. Until then I knew him as a friend and colleague.

“The workers had been told to clean the storage yard by their supervisor. This happened whenever the production line broke down, which is what occurred that morning. This was in the area where processed metals were stored, piled up against a wall made up of concrete blocks that was not strong enough to hold the weight.

“It collapsed on them as they were conducting the cleaning, taking five lives. Another worker was trapped and received a serious leg injury. There was one other survivor. Fortunately for him, he had left the area before the collapse and returned directly after to witness the devastation. He has suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

“He is not often referred to, his name is Basamba Drammeh. He is an unrecognised victim, left with deep mental scars. He joined our protest on July 7, but is still suffering from grief and was unable to speak.

“Tombong Conteh, who survived the collapse, has a leg

injury which restricts his ability to walk and stand up. He has some metal left in his leg from the accident. He was also at our protest. We managed to get him a chair so he could be seated and participate. He has received reduced state benefit on the grounds that he had recently arrived in the country before the accident and had not built up enough points in the system.

“All the workers were agency workers. Five were from Gambia and one from Senegal. They came to the UK from Spain. They were unable to find work in Spain after the economic downturn. All the men were married and had children.

“Their safety may well have been compromised because English was not their first language and they were not familiar with the safety laws and regulations. They were all on zero-hour contracts. It can be difficult to raise concerns if you are on such contracts, as you might not be called back to work. I know that Saibo Sillah had been refused leave for Eid at one of his placements with the agency, at a waste company, and had been told not to report back when he decided to take the leave anyway. He told me this just before he was killed at Hawkwood Recycling, now Shredmet.

“This tragedy was avoidable. If the proper measures had been taken against the company for its previous breaches, they would have had to take safety more seriously. Family members of the workers killed are asking how they could put concrete partitions together as a wall without using anything to hold them together and prevent it from falling. This is a very high-risk industry and I thought the health and safety in that place would have been monitored more regularly. The company should have had proper safety measures in place.

“We came together from day one, working with the families and the lawyers. We expected by now that the families would have received at least some compensation. It’s been four years, and it’s hard to imagine how

difficult it must be for them to get by. Some individuals will help. Some charities will help. But that is difficult to sustain four years on. That is why friends, family and the community decided we needed to do something about this. It is up to us to say, 'Listen you have killed our people in your factory. What are you going to do to compensate the families? Now!'

"We are not just doing this for the families who have directly suffered. We need people to know their rights. In the meantime, we are fighting for the families to get the compensation and justice they deserve.

"We decided on the fourth anniversary that we needed to protest. Before we had marked the anniversaries in a more sombre way, in private. This time around I spoke to the families and the legal representatives and decided enough is enough. We need to show our dissatisfaction with the company. These families are still waiting for something and nothing has happened.

"The ruling of the Inquest in 2018 was accidental death, but it ruled the accident was 'avoidable' and 'foreseeable'. I am not legally minded. I don't know much about law. For those of us who attended the Inquest we could not understand how it was avoidable and foreseeable and people were killed but the company is not held responsible for manslaughter.

"Three of the families of the victims are in the UK, one is in Spain and the other in Gambia. The company has not kept in contact with the families. They initially expressed their condolences, but nothing since then. You would have expected them to show some support to the families to remind them that they were with them in their grief and enquire after their well-being. That never happened.

"The company lawyers were not prepared to accept making an interim payment of compensation which carried no liability. That is meant to be a standard procedure, just to help with the loss of income because of the death of loved ones. The families are struggling big time, they are suffering, both here and back in Africa. Gambia is a poor country. If you have brothers, sisters and extended family most of these people rely on remittances for their daily living.

"I do not accept the explanations from the Health Safety Executive (HSE) as to why they have not brought charges against the company four years after the event. They say they have had some departmental and management changes and have also cited the Covid crisis. I am not convinced by this. The lockdown in the UK happened in March this year. Whatever limitations they have been under since the pandemic they should have completed

their investigation before now. The HSE had promised to come up with charges or something to tell the families by the time of the fourth anniversary.

"The leader of Birmingham City Council, Ian Ward, and Labour MP Shabana Mahmood said they would write to the HSE and make sure this investigation is completed as soon as possible and a report is provided on their findings.

"They did not attend our protest on the fourth anniversary. Ian Ward said he would attend, but then informed us he had another engagement. He sent a statement to the families' lawyers and we received an email from Shabana Mahmood, who asked for her statement to be read to the protest. As neither of them were prepared to make a priority of attending the demonstration in person, or send a representative on their behalf, the families were not prepared to accept these gestures and decided against having them read to the gathering.

"I made the placards for the demonstration myself. These placards read 'All lives matter.' It is important that this is not seen as an issue of migrant workers as it is portrayed in the media. All lives matter and I wanted to make a broad appeal based upon winning support against how the rights of these workers and their families have been violated by the company.

"We want to make sure that nobody else suffers the same way in future. What we witnessed at Shredmet on that fateful day and how the families have been mistreated must never be repeated. We will not rest until we see these families get the compensation and justice they are due."



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