

The scandal of *Toxic Town*—birth defects linked to pollution in former UK steel town Corby

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The miniseries *Toxic Town* available now on Netflix deals with the tragic cluster of birth defects in newborns in Corby, a town in Northamptonshire, England between 1984 and 1998. The defects were a consequence of the negligent clean-up of a former steelworks.

As many as 30 children, possibly more, were born with deformities or other serious health problems.

The events in Corby have been likened to the 1960s thalidomide scandal, in which that drug—given during pregnancy for morning sickness—caused limb malformation in the foetus.

Not surprisingly, the drama is number one in the top 10 shows in the UK Netflix charts. In the shadow of the COVID pandemic, the terrible slaughter in Gaza, the normalization of death and disease by the ruling elites, the series is resonating powerfully with audiences.

The indifference of governments and corporations to the health of those who produce the wealth, and above all the courage of the mothers, their families and supporters, are powerfully portrayed.

For 13 years the mothers of the children born with deformities fought doggedly for answers and justice. With the indispensable help of Des Collins (played by Rory Kinnear) of Collins Solicitors—working on a no-win no-fee basis without legal aid—they won a court settlement against Corby Borough Council of £14.6 million in 2009 for 18 children with limb malformations.

Executive producer Annabel Jones first heard of the scandal during lockdown, from a friend from Corby, and decided the story “needs to be pulled into public consciousness; we need to be made aware so things like this don’t happen again.”

Producer Delyth Scudamore, director Minkie Spiro, script writer Jack Thorne, cast and crew have created an engaging drama that from the opening lines has the viewer batting for the mothers as they fight for the truth.

The producers assembled a cast of fine actors, some of whom met their real-life counterparts from Corby to prepare for the roles.

The first episode in the series is perhaps the weakest. In an

attempt at “authenticity” the profanity is overdone, but as the story moves along, the danger of the characters becoming stereotypes passes.

Some of the characters in the series are fictional, as is the clean-up company Rhodes Miller construction and haulage, and its boss Pat Miller.

Actor Brendan Coyle, known for his role in the series *Downton Abbey*, plays Labour councillor Roy Thomas—a composite character based on several councillors.

Embracing the “get filthy rich” policies of the New Labour government under Tony Blair (1997-2007)—the Thomas character justifies lack of health and safety as an unfortunate byproduct of plans to regenerate the town after the collapse of the steel industry.

Coyle’s own family was one of thousands lured from Scotland to England’s industrial Midlands with the offer of secure employment and a council house to work in the steelworks. In 1967 almost 400,000 were still employed in the then nationalised steel industry.

In the 1980s, under the impact of international competition and to tackle the combativity of the working class, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) began to dismantle the steel and coal industry. Mass class battles broke out to defend jobs, betrayed by the trade unions. Towns like Corby were decimated; its steel plant closed with the loss of 11,000 jobs.

The successor Tory government under John Major (1990-1997) operated a division of labour with the Labour Party, which ran the majority of councils in urban areas, in dealing with the decommissioning of up to 70 years of steel industry waste. Labour-run Corby council planned to reclaim the 700-acre steelworks site and attract private capital to build a theme park and businesses.

In the drama, the Rhodes Miller firm is contracted to transport the waste and dump it in huge landfill sites. Drivers earn a bonus according to how many trips they make, and management ignore safety protocols despite the lorries carrying hazardous material.

In one scene, council technical engineer Ted Jenkins (Stephen

McMillan), approaches council leader Thomas with concerns about the disregard for safety. Jenkins knew from council documents the waste contained highly toxic contaminants including cadmium, arsenic, lead and chromium and was appalled to see the lorries speeding through the town without covers, waste spilling onto the roads. Returning to the depot the lorries were meant to go through a wheel wash, which never happened.

When the sludge on the road dried it turned into a fine red dust that spread over the town “like a sandstorm”, which the town of 60,000 breathed in.

Thomas responds to Jenkins’ concerns with, “I’ve heard you’re creating a spot of trouble... I’m trying to find a balance between red tape and reality.”

Clean-up company boss Miller (Ben Batt) attempts to bribe Jenkins to forget his concerns with a wad of notes, which he declines.

At one point Jenkins’ car is set ablaze.

At the centre of the drama are the mothers coping with the disabilities of their children. At first, they wonder if they are to blame but soon find there are many children suffering similar injuries.

Susan McIntyre, mother of Connor who was born with a deformed hand, is played by Jodie Whittaker. In one touching scene, Susan asks Tracey Taylor (Aimee Lou Wood) her deceased daughter’s name—Shelby Anne. Tracey said nobody ever asks that, as if her child wasn’t important. Shelby Anne only lived for four days, her inner organs malformed.

In another scene, Thomas is urged by the owner of clean-up company Miller to agree an out-of-court settlement to prevent the case coming to trial, fearing the truth would ruin his business.

Thomas responds with a rant that expresses all the contempt of the Labour Party for the working class: “People expect perfect nowadays. Nothing can be perfect but good enough. Corby was built on good enough. The steelworks—not perfect but good enough—some people got hurt. I’ll fight these fuckers...fuck them and fuck you for trying to stop me.”

The Corby Group Litigation V Corby Borough Council legal case opened at the High Court in London in February 2009.

One scene shows the media asking Susan why she is there. “Nobody cares about the working class in this country and somebody needs to,” she replies.

The plaintiffs proved:

- That a cluster of birth defects existed, at three times the national average.
- The link between toxins such as cadmium and birth defects in animals and how toxins were able to contaminate the pregnant women, through airborne dust.
- That Corby Council were knowingly negligent.

Many of the mothers bravely take to the witness stand. The defence plays dirty, dredging up Susan McIntyre’s mental health problems before she fell pregnant. Recorded in the

council’s minutes were scurrilous charges against the mothers that they might be responsible for their children’s unfortunate deformities, due to smoking, drinking or drug taking during pregnancy.

Safety engineer Jenkins previously shared council documents with councillor Sam Hagen providing incriminating evidence of the council’s malign neglect. Hagen shared them with the mothers’ solicitor Collins. Jenkins was summonsed to give evidence before the court. His testimony is damning.

The court scenes are based on transcripts of the proceedings and the suspense is palpable.

Jenkins tells the court, “Our job was to make the land fit for redevelopment... I flagged health and safety concerns at numerous sites... For the firm and the council involved having those sites cleared for redevelopment was all that mattered.”

In a dramatic standoff between council leader Thomas and Collins after the mothers win their case, Thomas justifies the council’s criminality by saying it helped the town survive after the closure of the steelworks. Collins rejects this contemptuously, replying they put “profits over people.”

Notes at the end of the drama inform the viewer:

- The verdict was a landmark decision, the first to prove the link between airborne toxic waste and birth defects.
- A 2021 study of the Environmental Agency data shows at least 21,000 former landfill sites across England and Wales. Up to 1,287 contain hazardous waste. 267 are under housing, restaurants and shops. 4 are under schools.

As a result of the court case, the families won compensation and learned the truth, but did they receive justice? No charges were brought against either the clean-up company or council leaders. Such was the case after the Hillsborough disaster and most likely the Grenfell Tower inferno police investigation will end with the council and corporate criminals getting away with their heinous crimes.

Toxic Town deserves a wide audience. Revealed is capitalism in its true colours, and the cruel deception that the Labour Party in any way represents the interests of the working class. Similar outrages will only be prevented by putting an end to the capitalist system, which as the series so graphically shows, prioritises profits over life.



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