

“Buried alive by the National Coal Board”

The Aberfan disaster in Wales 50 years on

By Margot Miller
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This year marks 50 years since the Aberfan disaster. On October 21, 1966, after several days of heavy rain, the children of Aberfan village, near Merthyr Tydfil in Wales, had just arrived in their classrooms for the last day of term.

Within minutes an avalanche of coal waste from the 34 metre Tip Number Seven came thundering down the mountainside, destroying two cottages and their occupants in its path. It engulfed Pantglas Junior School and a further 16 houses with a deadly mixture of mud, sludge and rubble. The houses were buried so that just their rooftops could be seen.

As soon as the alarm was raised, firefighters were joined by hundreds of miners from nearby collieries. Shovels in hand, the miners organised themselves into a search and rescue party and fought desperately to rescue the pupils. Many of the children buried under the debris were their own. Crowds of distraught mothers gathered nearby. As the hours went by, more and more bodies of children aged between 7 and 10 were pulled out, dead from impact or suffocation. A total of 116 children, almost half the pupils, perished that day, along with 28 adults, including five teachers.

The disaster was the responsibility of the National Coal Board (NCB). At the subsequent inquest for 30 of the children, there were shouts of “murderers.” One father declared he wanted to see the words “buried alive by the National Coal Board” on the death certificate.

Such was the outrage that within days the Labour government under Harold Wilson convened an official inquiry into the disaster. The chair was senior Welsh judge Edmund Davies, who pledged that there would be no whitewash. The public were excluded. The bereaved families employed their own lawyer, Desmond Ackner QC, to help determine the truth.

In a BBC documentary, *Aberfan: Fight for Justice*, presenter Huw Edwards raises important questions: Could the disaster have been prevented? Who was to blame? And why did it take so long to get the truth? The film revealed previously unseen transcripts of testimony from witnesses to

the inquiry.

The documentary includes newsreels taken before the disaster of seven huge tips of black coal waste on the side of a mountain ridge towering menacingly over Aberfan. For 50 years, waste from Merthyr Vale colliery had been dumped there, with minimal transportation costs.

Head of the NCB at the time was Alfred Robens, Baron Robens of Woldingham, a senior trade union official in the 1930s and a Labour councillor from 1941 to 1945. Robens became an MP in 1945 as Labour won a landslide victory after the war under Clement Atlee. Labour nationalised some basic industries, including coal, in 1947. Robens became minister for labour, after serving four years as a junior minister in the Ministry of Power, in the final days of the 1945-51 Atlee government.

As the Aberfan community fought to save their children, Robens chose not to travel to the village, instead attending a ceremony of his investiture as vice chancellor at the University of Surrey. He did not show his face in Aberfan until two days later, when he set out the position of the NCB that the disaster was due to unforeseen geological circumstances and therefore the NCB was not culpable. “It was impossible to know there was a spring in the heart of the mountain turning waste into slush,” he told reporters.

In fact it was common knowledge that tip number seven was dumped over springs, marked on local ordinance survey maps. Children would play in ponds made by the springs.

When Crown QC Tasker Watkins asked a senior worker, Leslie Davies, whether management had ever asked his views on tip safety or whether he had been warned that it was dangerous to tip waste over spring, he answered no. Mechanical Engineer Vivian Thomas, responsible for all the tips in the area, had never been provided with an ordinance survey map, which would have shown springs on the mountainside—and the potential for a landslide. Such conditions had already caused five coal waste slides. In 1939, 180,000 tonnes of waste slid 400 metres into the valley below, at nearby Cilfynydd. Fortunately there were no casualties. Slides also occurred at Aberfan in 1944 and in

1963.

In response to the 1939 slide, the Powell Memo stipulated no tipping over water, on steep mountains, and that no tip should stand higher than 20 metres. When the NCB took over the mines, the memo was shelved. Coal mines were run without any safety precautions regarding the tips. On March 29, 1965, a year before the tragedy, there was another incident, and though the Powell memo was retrieved, it was not acted upon.

At the end of the 76-day inquiry, Robens made a surprise appearance, recanted his previous press statement and admitted liability for the disaster on behalf of the NCB.

Summing up for the families, Ackner concluded the disaster was “man-made.”

The inquiry report was published four months later, but while it found that the NCB’s liability for the disaster was “incontestable and uncontested” with “no clear guidance on safety,” no one was prosecuted, dismissed, fined or even disciplined.

Robens, after making a gesture of resignation, rejected by Prime Minister Wilson, remained in his post for several more years. In 1969, he was appointed by Labour Minister for Employment Barbara Castle to chair a committee on workplace health and safety.

While chairman of the NCB in 1961-71, Robens worked closely with the National Union of Miners (NUM) led by Will Paynter, in shutting 60 percent of UK pits, with the loss of 300,000 jobs. The NUM were exonerated by the inquiry of any responsibility for the disaster on the grounds of having no one qualified to investigate safety of the tips, “short of going out of the industry and employing a civil engineer.” The NUM made no attempt to mobilise their members in a safety campaign, though it had been informed of the dangers.

Parents and the headmistress of Pantglas School, Ann Jennings, who was to become a victim of the disaster, presented petitions to Merthyr County Borough Council, and a local councillor raised the dangers at every council meeting under any other business.

Borough Engineer DCW Jones informed the NCB that “the tip at the rear of Pantglas School ... was extremely serious as the slurry is so fluid and the gradient so steep that it could not possibly stay in position in the winter time or during periods of heavy rain.” To this urgent warning the colliery manager replied, “A satisfactory and suitable place other than the tip eludes me at the moment.”

Local NUM officials raised the concerns of residents to managers at two meetings of the Colliery Joint Consultative Committee. But, on receiving reassurances about the installation of an aerial ropeway in about six months’ time and that the tip would dry out, the union dropped the matter.

In the report, Ackner explained, “the union feared ... that a demand for action would involve substantial expenditure and that would give rise to the pit closing.”

Tasker Watkins QC said, “[L]ocal officials of the union preferred to overlook the appreciated danger of a tip slide lest complaint should place in jeopardy the livelihood of a large number of men in the Taff Valley.”

The NCB originally planned to offer just £50 each in compensation to the families for the deaths, eventually giving just £500 per victim. The NCB, with government approval, refused to remove the remaining tips, citing cost.

In contrast, 90,000 individual donations poured in from around the world, amounting to £1.75 million, for the bereaved families, who eventually had a community centre built and Memorial Gardens laid on the site of the school.

In 1968, the families occupied the Welsh Office and dumped slurry from the tips onto the meeting tables and confronted Labour Welsh Secretary George Thomas, for which they were arrested. Only then did the government agree to remove the tips. However, Thomas insisted the families of Aberfan contribute £250,000 (later reduced to £150,000) towards the removal costs. This was taken from the Aberfan Memorial charity fund.

Three decades later, under another Labour government, the community centre faced closure as the memorial fund was running low. No money was even allocated to tend the Memorial Gardens. In 1997, the Labour government of Tony Blair was forced to return the original £150,000. But it was not until 2007 that the Welsh Office, under Labour, finally repaid £1.5 million to the community—the real value of the money stolen from them, taking inflation and interest into account.

The limited justice the people of Aberfan achieved was by their own efforts and in opposition to Labour and the trade unions—organisations which have proved time and again to be the most ardent defenders of capitalism.

A number of photos of the Aberfan disaster and its aftermath can be viewed here and here.

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