

Peak District residents speak on Toddbrook dam collapse

“That dam could have gone in the middle of the night and at least 600 people would have died”

By our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to residents in the town of Chapel-en-le-Frith in the Peak District on Wednesday. Those evacuated from Whaley Bridge and other areas after the nearby Toddbrook dam collapsed were sent to Chapel High School in the town. At the stage authorities told them they were not sure how long the emergency operation to secure the dam would take or how long they would be away from their imperiled homes. They were allowed to return to their homes on Wednesday.

The interviews reveal that residents are aware of some of the wider implications of the near tragedy at Whaley Bridge and the impact that relentless austerity measures are taking on all the social gains of the working class built up over decades, including the right to a safe home and environment.

Rebecca lives in Chinley, a rural village two miles from Whaley Bridge. “The scary thing was I didn’t know about it,” she said. “I work at the Shrigley Hall Hotel and that’s Macclesfield way. It was my ex-partner who turned up when I finished work and said ‘you’ve got to follow me as you can’t go down there ’cause it’s going to go, the reservoir’s gonna go. With all the flooding they are shutting all the roads.’ My first question was how am I going to get back to Chinley?”

“A lot of my friends have been severely affected by it as they’ve not managed to get to work. My friend who has two young children under the age of two has had to stay at her brother’s one-bedroom flat in New Mills. My other friend has had to stay up in Huddersfield at her boyfriend’s, and others have only been able to go

back in to get pets, etc.

“The dam is an old structure nearly 200 years of age and nothing’s been done previously to maintain it. We have never had anything like this where a month’s rain has fallen in a day. Nothing has needed to have been done before. This was unexpected but I think it’s a wake-up call for the rest of the UK that have got old reservoirs that haven’t been maintained. That could have gone in the middle of the night and at least 600 people would have died.”

Retiree **Lyn** said, “There is an infrastructure problem. Is it the concrete? They put concrete on the old structure. When I was a kid I was brought up in a house that was made of concrete and it got concrete cancer [caused when the steel reinforcing within a concrete slab begins to rust]. Was it something like that?”

“It has wider implications. It’s only when you get these severe weather incidents that the problems come out so they [the government] are not doing their jobs properly in checking. It’s just a tick box exercise.

She posed the question, “How do you have professional engineers passing it as fine when clearly there was a problem? It only took one really bad weather incident to show the problem. I don’t understand how they could not have been aware of that. There are things growing on the slipway and there’s a possibility that the structure underneath is being undermined by roots and foliage.

“I’m sure it was checked again after the last inspection. There were two checks by different agencies.”

“It’s distressing for people and it’s the whole infrastructure—the rail, the roads and health. [Conservative Prime Minister] Boris Johnson [who visited Whaley Bridge last week, describing the dam as “dodgy but stable”] will sell the National Health Service to the US and the private health companies. The two should be separate. There should be no place for the private system in the NHS. It’s a waste of resources.”

Alec is a bus driver employed by High Peak Buses. He explained that when the dam collapsed, “As drivers we had to reroute so ran the risk of going over driving hours and adding time to the service.”

Referring to the Canal & River Trust that is responsible for the maintenance of the dam, he said, “Whether it’s because it’s a charitable trust that runs the servicing of the dam and they won’t commit to doing big projects, it’s part of the way things have gone.

“The concern in today’s world is that like Grenfell tower they [the government] looked at all the other towers [that have similar flammable cladding to Grenfell] and said we’ve got a lot more of them. And what’s been done about it? Not a lot.

“I’ve got a funny feeling they’ll do the same with this. They’ll look at the prospect of it and do nothing about it.”

Richard works at a Morrison’s supermarket store and said friends were having to cycle in or walk to work as buses aren’t running.

“It’s such an old dam and it’s probably not been checked over regularly as they think that because it’s lasted 200 years nothing will happen. There could be loads of dams like that which you don’t even know about. The fact that it could have ruined the whole of the town is a big issue.”

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