

Hillsborough families denied justice for 96 deaths after 30 years, as ex-police chief walks free

By Robert Stevens
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More than 30 years after 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters died at Hillsborough football stadium, no one will now ever be brought to account.

On Thursday, the South Yorkshire Police match commander, David Duckenfield, was found not guilty of gross negligence manslaughter for the deaths of 95 Liverpool fans, in a retrial, by a majority of 9-1. He was not tried over the death of the 96th victim, Tony Bland, as he died more than a year and a day after the disaster.

Those who perished horrifically and their families have been denied any justice by the British state. Three other police officers will face trial, but not over the deaths. No corporate entity has ever been prosecuted.

On hearing the verdict, family members gasped and wept in the court. Mary Corrigan, the mother of 17-year-old victim Keith McGrath, shouted out as the verdict was read out by Judge Sir Peter Openshaw, “Stitched up again.”

Christine Burke, the daughter of victim Henry Burke, asked in tears, “I would like to know who is responsible for my father’s death, because someone is.”

Openshaw did not respond, saying instead to a CPS barrister that there were “matters to sort out” and then clearing the court.

Margaret Aspinall, chair of the Hillsborough Families Support Group, who lost her 18-year-old son James, said at a press conference, “The question I’d like to ask all of you and people within the system is who put 96 people in their graves, who is accountable?”

On April 15, 1989 at the FA Cup semi-final, Liverpool supporters entered the Leppings Lane end of the Hillsborough ground in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. An exit gate was opened, under instruction from Duckenfield, and a large number of fans were funnelled into an already dangerously overcrowded pen. The pen was fenced at the front, preventing fans from spilling onto the playing field. The victims were crushed to death.

This was the second time Duckenfield has been tried over

the deaths. In April, the original jury in the trial was dismissed after failing to reach a verdict at the conclusion of a 10-day trial by a required majority of 10-2.

That jury did find former Sheffield Wednesday club secretary Graham Mackrell guilty on a health and safety charge relating to the provision of turnstiles on the day. He allocated just seven turnstiles for 10,100 Liverpool supporters to enter the Leppings Lane terrace. Mackrell received a fine of £6,500 and remains the first and only person to ever be convicted of an offence relating to the tragedy.

After the initial failure to reach a verdict, Duckenfield’s legal team applied to stay the trial. This was rejected after the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in the face of growing public anger, applied for a retrial. In June, Openshaw ruled that a retrial should go ahead.

The events happened so long ago that 75-year-old Duckenfield was the last major figure who bore responsibility and was still alive. Conservative Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, died in 2013. Sir Irvine Patnick, Tory MP for Sheffield Hallam who said Liverpool fans were responsible for their own deaths, died in 2012. Dead aged 82 is Peter Wright, the chief constable of South Yorkshire Police who was in charge of overall operations in Sheffield, and who played a pivotal role in the subsequent cover-up. Others dead include Stefan Popper, who oversaw the discredited original inquest into the disaster in 1991, and Police Superintendent Bernard Murray, the ground commander on the day.

The 9-1 majority verdict is perverse given the evidence the jury were presented with. But the families are on record that crucial evidence made available in the last decade was not presented at the trial and complained that Openshaw was not being impartial in his kid-gloves treatment of Duckenfield.

Duckenfield did not testify at the retrial, but audio recordings of his testimony at the inquests of the victims in 2015 were heard by the court. In one, Duckenfield accepted

the summation of his own barrister, John Beggs QC, that his “professional failings led to the deaths of 96 innocent men, women and children.” He admitted that he told Football Association chief executive, Graham Kelly, a lie on the day that a gate had been “forced,” leading to an “in-rush” of supporters into the Leppings Lane end.

The truth about what happened at Hillsborough only emerged due to the tenacious fight of the families, who fought relentlessly for justice.

In September 2012, the Hillsborough Independent Panel (HIP), set up four years previously, published its report that finally exonerated the Liverpool supporters of all blame for the events.

The question is, why did it take 30 years to bring any prosecution and then only after every other major figure responsible had evaded justice?

After the verdict, Margie Matthews, widow of Brian Mathews, who died at Hillsborough aged just 38, made a telling point: “I don’t think one man can be the figurehead or the whipping boy for the whole of the tragedy that unfolded.”

The fact is that no police officer was ever going to be found guilty by the British legal system. Given that Duckenfield was the last major figure involved still alive, the ruling elite could do nothing else but allow him to face a trial—but the verdict means that even the scapegoat has evaded justice.

The *Sun*, which played a filthy role in disseminating lies about Hillsborough, had the effrontery to headline its front-page Friday in block capitals, “Still no justice.” But it did accurately summarise the scale of the cover-up involved and which it supported for years. A strapline read, “£60m police probe, 200 investigators, 143,000 documents, 30 years, 96 dead.” Even then the probe and investigation it refers to only cover the years since 2012, after the HIP report led to the opening of a criminal investigation.

From the outset, the families faced a vast orchestrated campaign to vilify them and deny justice involving every arm of the state, from central government to the South Yorkshire Police. The period prior to Hillsborough was marked by heightened class conflict, in which the entire might of the state was mobilised against the miners—described by Thatcher as the “Enemy within.” The South Yorkshire Police played a key role in brutal attacks on workers and their families and supporters during the 1984-85 miners’ strike. Wright joined SYP in 1983 and led it during the strike. Thatcher, in alliance with the Labour Party, also targeted Liverpool, as a city with a long left-wing and socialist tradition.

Nothing was too base in vilifying Liverpool and its people. Some of the most grotesque comments were made in the

Spectator under the editorship of now Conservative Minister Boris Johnson, In 2004, the Tory’s house magazine issued an editorial accusing Liverpoolians of wallowing in their “victim status” and “drunken fans” of “mindlessly [trying] to fight their way into the ground...”

The court verdict is a crime heaped upon a terrible crime, with far-reaching implications.

Grenfell United, representing the families of the 72 people who died as a result of the June 2017 Grenfell fire, wrote, “Our hearts are with the #Hillsborough families tonight.” They should also take warning that the ongoing official government inquiry into Grenfell led by Sir Martin Moore-Bick will inevitably end in a similar whitewash. Two and a half years after the fire, with the first phase of the inquiry completed, not a single person responsible for the death in political or corporate circles has been arrested let alone charged for this barbaric act of social murder.

Hillsborough is also a warning of the type of class justice that awaits WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from Britain’s legal system, when he faces an extradition trial next February. As far as the judiciary and the Tory government are concerned, the verdict has already been decided: Assange will be sent to the United States to face 175 years in prison for exposing war crimes. Only the mobilisation of a mass movement of workers and all those concerned with democratic rights all over the world can prevent this.

The author recommends:

Timeline of the Hillsborough disaster and cover-up as it unfolded
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