

# Wales mine deaths: Privatisation comes under the spotlight

The tragic deaths of four coalminers at the Gleision Colliery in the Swansea Valley, South Wales, has inevitably raised the issue of safety in the mining industry. Mariam Kamish, Tower Colliery Lodge NUM (personal capacity) and Socialist Party Wales, looks at what has happened to health and safety in the mines since privatisation in 1994.

Health and safety legislation and regulations for the mining industry in Britain are very comprehensive, but they only work to their full extent when miners are in a position to see them enforced.

The rules exist because miners have fought for them through our union, the NUM and its predecessors.

Privatisation in 1994 saw conditions in the industry take a big step backwards. There has been a fracturing and fragmentation of mining practices. The various private operators have very different ideas of what equipment to use and how to organise the running of collieries.

It's common now to find equipment in place that had not been used under British Coal since the 1960s. Practices and standards of operation in some collieries would not have been accepted by the union pre-privatisation. In some cases, even in large collieries run by major companies, conditions today are frankly dangerous.

## Legislation

The NUM has kept pushing for improvements in regulations post-privatisation and has had a few important successes.

One was the introduction in the 1990s of modern 'safe havens', where in an emergency miners can find food, spare self-rescuers, independent ventilation and communications equipment in a sealed or semi-sealed installation.

Miners at Tower Colliery in South Wales, which was run as a cooperative from 1995-2008, were at the

forefront of the introduction of safe haven regulations.

Unfortunately, legislation has been left deliberately vague. Under the "Escape and Rescue from Mines Regulations 1995", the mine manager only has to provide safe havens where they are considered necessary to the emergency plan for the pit.

The law has also been changed for the worse post-privatisation. A prime example is roof bolting, which in 1996 was made legal as a primary support for roadways where "the HSE has granted exemption" from the 1954 and 1966 legislation.

That previous legislation said that underground roadways had to be supported by steel rings.

In America and Australia where unions were not in as strong a position, roof bolting had been long been used, despite on-going controversy. Roof bolting has certainly been responsible for deaths in British pits.

## Nationalisation

Many regulations do not even apply to small mines. According to Mines Rescue team members, speaking in a personal capacity, conditions at Gleision Colliery were 19th century. The only modern equipment was the panzer that brought out the coal.

That doesn't mean that the private owner was intentionally negligent, but he didn't have the money to operate a modern mine.

The simple lesson from this terrible tragedy (and one that trade union members all over the world have argued for many, years) is that mining is an industry that needs to be run on a nationalised basis under democratic control, with consistent standards, the funding to implement them and constant oversight by a well-organised union.

Mining will never be completely safe. When you're working underground, the environment is always unpredictable.

To work as safely as possible, you need the highest level of skills in the team on every shift and safety has to come first in every single decision made in the running of the pit. That will never be the case in a private industry run to maximise profit.



photo Paul Mattsson

# 12th hour reprieve for Dale Farm

Dave Murray, Basildon

At 4pm on Monday 19 September the tense stand-off, between bailiffs on one side and Dale Farm Travellers and their supporters on the other, gave way to jubilation and relief as news arrived that the High Court had granted an injunction to stop Basildon council's forced evictions until a further hearing on Friday.

The eviction had been due to start at 8am, but bailiffs had held back in the face of the obstacles that had been prepared for them. Many brave individuals had "locked on" to various structures on the site: one woman shackled herself to the gate by the neck.

Shortly before the news of the injunction arrived, a bailiff approached the gate to make a statement expressing concern for the safety of the protesters and the stability of the gate, and requesting that it be taken down. After getting a fairly sharp answer, he withdrew, his next move stymied by the court decision.

The residents of the site have faced an uncertain time. Though the Travellers' representatives have been extremely resourceful in their use of legal challenges and though many Travellers are heartened by the presence of the supporters around "camp constant", there is no doubt that Dale Farm residents feel

the threat of eviction keenly.

"It's humiliating," said Mr Quilligan, long time resident on the site, "if we aren't allowed to stay here, on land we own, where there already is an official site that no one has a problem with, that used to be a scrapyard, then where are we supposed to stay?" Attempts by Travellers' representatives to identify other suitable sites have met a stone wall from Basildon council.

Monday's judgement requires bailiffs to give residents a plot-by-plot account of how they will proceed with the evictions. Finding that the council's actions "went further" than the legal orders it had obtained, Justice Edwards-Stuart stated that: "It is in no one's interests that we have a riot on this site."

The sensible first step here would be to let the Dale Farm Travellers stay on what is, essentially, a brown-field site. Next, the authorities would need to wake up to the fact that there is a shortage of authorised sites caused entirely by their own policy of allowing local councils to duck their responsibility to a whole section of the population.

With £18 million budgeted for the eviction it is more likely that Basildon council will press on, with government backing, in its campaign against the Dale Farm Travellers. It must be resisted.

More info: <http://dalefarm.wordpress.com/>

## Fast news

### Breadline USA

'The rich get richer, the poor get poorer'; is perhaps an overused cliché, but, nevertheless, a phrase that accurately describes social conditions in the USA today. The latest US Census Bureau statistics show that 46.2 million people (15.1% of the population) fell below the poverty line, meaning that more Americans are living in poverty than at any time since records began 50 years ago. Millions of people are mired in poverty as a result of the capitalist Great Recession and continuing high levels of unemployment, but a wealthy minority continue to enjoy their conspicuous consumption. The Bureau reveals that median wages (ie what most workers earn) peaked in 1999 and are still 7% below that level, whereas the richest Americans' spending held constant at \$1,400 billion.

Nearly one-quarter of all children are in poverty, a figure more akin to the 1960s when president Johnson announced his 'war on poverty'.

And despite the political furore over Obama's health care reforms, the number of Americans without health insurance rose by one million in the last year to a staggering 49.9 million.

### Stop Uni cuts

Staff at Northampton University held a lunchtime protest on 14 September against proposals to cut support staff jobs.

Tina McGarvey, a Unison rep, spoke to the Socialist:

"They are proposing to cut 78 posts. Without the support staff of all kinds, lecturers cannot deliver, and it will ultimately affect students. UCU and Unison are standing together against the management's attempt to divide and rule. There will be a consultative ballot on industrial action and there will be further protests."

Paul Crofts, Unison rep said:

"There has been a culture of fear among staff, some of whom have in the past been afraid to speak out. The university has attempted to drive a wedge between support staff and academic staff by suggesting that money saved from getting rid of support staff would fund lecturers' jobs. UCU has completely rejected that argument. They are aware that the next lot of cuts will be among academic staff. The campaign will continue."

### Coventry by-election

The upcoming council by-election in Lower Stoke, Coventry, (6 October) is providing a great opportunity to direct people to real socialist ideas.

As the Labour-led council tries to force through £38 million in cuts, Coventry Socialist Party candidate, Robert McArdle, has been able to expose how Labour have become the Tory axemen.

Working class people did not cause the banking crisis and canvassing in the ward has helped get the message across that we shouldn't be forced to pay for it. The by-election also provides an opportunity to present an alternative to this rotten capitalist system.

We need more councillors like the Socialist Party's Dave Nellist, who has a long history of standing up for workers in Coventry. To assist in the campaign: 07530 429441

# Private rail companies - a licence to print money

Tory transport secretary Philip Hammond recently described Britain's railways as a "rich man's toy". As a millionaire, he should know. Hammond criticised high rail fares while ignoring the fact that his government gave the green signal to the publicly subsidised train operating companies to ratchet-up fares. Examining the failure of the privately run system, Mark Pickersgill calls for the renationalisation of the railways.

Next January, train fare prices are going up on average by 8%, that's 3% above the retail price index (RPI). Some fares are rising by 13%. Hammond justified this by saying that major rail infrastructure projects had to be funded and last Novem-

ber's comprehensive spending review aimed to cut the cost of running the railway by £1 billion by 2018.

So government subsidies will be cut to the train operating companies (TOCs) who run the system and they will, of course, pass on the shortfall to passengers. These increases will hit many workers hard. For many people, travelling costs take a big chunk from their salaries and on average fares will rise four times faster in 2012 than wages.

Running Britain's privatised railway system costs on average 30% more than similar rail networks in other countries and fares are Europe's highest. Britain's railways still receive nearly £5 billion in taxpayers' money.

Virgin for instance received £250 million in government subsidies over the last four years - privatised railways receive more in govern-

ment subsidies than did the old nationalised British Rail.

In 1993 the railways were privatised and fragmented to allow 'get rich quick' entrepreneurs to extract huge profits. There are now 20 rail franchises run by TOCs who bid for franchises which last for about seven years.

The TOCs are virtually asset-free, leasing their trains from rolling stock companies owned by banks such as HSBC, RBS and Santander. The most expensive part of maintaining the system is funded with public money through Network Rail.

Even when the TOCs cannot pay back money owed to the government because of falling profits, the debt is written off.

When National Express was exposed to £1.4 billion of debts in the East Coast Main Line franchise they simply pulled out and handed the

franchise back, forcing the government to run it.

Overcrowding is rife. Today, as many passengers use the system as in the late 1950s but with only half the rail network in place after 50 years of closures and cuts.

But the private TOCs' main responsibility is to look after the interests of shareholders not passengers. That is why, while Tories, New Labour and Lib Dems all favour private enterprise having a stake in public transport, the Socialist Party calls for the renationalisation of the railway system.

The renationalised railways should be run under democratic workers' control as part of a properly planned and integrated public transport system for the benefit of the whole of society not for the profits and high lifestyles of the privateers.