

North London man wins compensation from police for false murder conviction

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Winston Silcott, the man falsely accused of murdering police officer Keith Blakelock during the 1985 riots on the Broadwater Farm estate in north London, has been awarded £50,000 damages by the Metropolitan Police.

The award was made eight years after the Court of Appeal quashed the conviction of Silcott and two others imprisoned with him, Mark Braithwaite and Engin Raghıp. The three had long argued they were the victims of a racist frame-up by police.

Almost immediately news of the damages payment became known, sections of the media launched a vitriolic campaign against Silcott, reminiscent of that in the aftermath of the Broadwater riots, when the *Sun* newspaper termed Silcott “the black beast”. On October 18, the *Daily Mail* carried a front-page picture of Silcott in prison—where he is serving a sentence for a previous conviction—over the caption “Winston Silcott's £50,000 smile”.

The papers also gave lengthy coverage to Blakelock's widow, Elizabeth Johnson, who condemned the settlement as “obscene” and said that she may pursue Silcott for damages through the civil courts. The Metropolitan Police Federation is said to be looking into the possibility of backing any action by Johnson.

The background to the Broadwater Farm riots was the death of Cynthia Jarrett, a West Indian mother, during a police raid on her home on October 5, 1985. Following protests at Tottenham Police station the next day, a large contingent of police were drafted onto the estate. In the ensuing confrontation between police and local youth, PC Blakelock was stabbed to death.

The killing became the focal point of a law-and-order campaign by the Thatcher government directed against working class neighbourhoods in general, and Broadwater Farm in particular. The inquiry into

Blakelock's death was the longest running in the history of the Metropolitan Police. One in ten youth on the estate were arrested and detained for an average of three days, including a mentally retarded 13-year-old boy. Of the more than 60 people that were tried on charges ranging from riot to murder, the evidence against the vast majority consisted mainly of “confessions” extracted in the absence of their solicitors.

Silcott was arrested on October 12. He was a founding member of the Broadwater Farm Youth Association, set up in 1981. One of the services it provided was giving advice to people who had been subjected to police harassment. In the run-up to the riots, the association had complained at the increased police presence on the estate.

Following his arrest, Silcott was denied access to a solicitor and was interrogated five times over the next day. According to police notes of the final interview, Silcott stated, “You ain't got enough evidence. Those kids will never go to court, you wait and see. Nobody else will talk to you. You can't keep me away from them.” Although Silcott refused to sign the transcript record, this statement was cited as a confession and was the only evidence used against him in court.

In 1987, Silcott, Braithwaite and Raghıp were convicted of Blakelock's murder. The prosecution did not present any witnesses who had seen any of the accused strike the fatal blow, nor was there any forensic evidence linking them to the attack. The three were tried on the basis that they had shared a “common purpose” with others unknown in the murder—the same method used by the apartheid regime in South Africa to imprison the Sharpeville Six.

After a four-year campaign to expose the frame-up, the Court of Appeal quashed the convictions.

Proceedings were begun against two officers, Detective Chief Superintendent Graham Melvin and Detective Inspector Maxwell Dingle, for fabricating evidence against Silcott. Braithwaite and Raghip were released, but Silcott remained in prison because he was serving a concurrent sentence for the killing of boxer Anthony Smith during a party. Silcott has always maintained that he was acting in self-defence and that the Smith murder conviction formed an integral part of police efforts to frame him for Blakelock's killing.

Simultaneous with the prosecution against the two officers, Silcott took out a lawsuit against the police for compensation. A high-profile campaign by the police—supported by the media—ensured that when the two officers, who had subsequently resigned, stood trial three years later, they were cleared. Silcott's compensation lawsuit was halted in 1996 after the Court of Appeal ruled he could not pursue allegations of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and claims that police officers had abused their positions.

In 1998 Silcott won the right to sue Metropolitan Police Chief Sir Paul Condon for compensation. It is this claim that resulted in last Friday's settlement.

While in prison Silcott has been described as a “model prisoner”. He is a vocal campaigner for prisoners' rights and has contributed to many other campaigns against frame-ups, including those of the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six. He has also had a collection of poetry published. Written with four other prisoners, the poems highlight the fact that they are the victims of racist miscarriages of justice.

See Also:

Racial Violence and Immigrant Issues in Britain
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“Fighting for Justice”—Winston Silcott web site



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