

United Nations criticises UK on race relations

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On August 21 the United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination severely criticised race relations in Britain. The committee expressed deep concerns at continuing racist attacks and harassment and noted that ethnic minorities were feeling increasingly vulnerable.

The Geneva-based committee periodically reviews reports submitted by the 156 member states to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The UN Commission noted concern over "institutional racism" within Britain's police force and other public institutions, which had resulted in serious shortcomings with regard to the investigation of racist incidents. This referred to the Macpherson Inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Steven Lawrence in May 1998 and the racially-biased handling of the case by the police. One of the Inquiry's main findings was that the British police and other bodies of the state apparatus were "institutionally racist". A number of measures were proposed to address this.

The Commission also said that asylum seekers might not have adequate access to expert legal services and criticised the high level of unemployment among ethnic minority groups. On the situation of ethnic minorities in Britain's schools, it points to racial harassment and bullying and a disproportionate level of exclusions.

In addition to Britain's official report, the UN Commission received a joint submission from 28 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) concerned with anti-racism and civil rights. Both the UK government's and NGOs' reports praised the progress supposedly made by the Blair Labour Government in the aftermath of the Macpherson inquiry.

But such congratulations are not justified by the facts. Black people remain six times more likely to be stopped and searched by police than whites, and there are a disproportionate number of deaths of those from

ethnic minorities while in police custody. In the last year, the number of recorded racist incidents has increased dramatically. According to the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism, there have been twelve racially motivated murders (known or suspected) since April 1997. Earlier this year, the fascist David Copeland was jailed for a series of nail-bomb attacks directed against ethnic minorities and homosexuals.

The NGO and UK government reports, as well as the UN Commission, treat the question of racism as a problem that can be dealt with by purely legal measures. They fail to acknowledge its deeper underlying political and social causes.

The growth in racist attacks and in racist behaviour by the police occurs against a background of rising social inequality. The latest figures of the Department of Social Security showed that the gap between rich and poor has continued to widen under the Labour government. In the financial year 1998-99 the wealthiest fifth of the population controlled 45 percent of all disposable wealth. In contrast, the poorest fifth controlled just 6 percent, down from 7 percent in 1995-6 and 10 percent in 1978. Blacks and Asians are disproportionately represented amongst the poor and disadvantaged. The Labour government has continued the previous Conservative government's policies of cutting public spending and attacking welfare.

Lacking any popular basis for these policies, the official parties response has been to strengthen the state apparatus and hence the suppression of the poorest section of society. Both try to outdo each other as the parties of law and order. Both employ right wing rhetoric to prove they are the "toughest" against immigrants, who they scapegoat for the social crisis produced by their own policies. In this they are joined by the tabloid press, which encourages all forms of racial tensions and resentment towards foreigners, with stories of Britain being "swamped" by asylum seekers.

The reaction to the UN Commission's criticism is a case in point. The Conservative Party condemned the UN outright for criticising the UK, saying it was not the UN's job to lecture Britain on how to run its affairs. A Conservative spokesman put the fault for racism squarely on the backs of its victims, "The main threat to that [racial harmony] is the systematic abuse of our asylum system by those who perceive Britain to be a soft touch." Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw was somewhat more circumspect. He insisted race relations were his "first priority" and that overall Britain had a better record than most countries in Europe and North America. But then he basically made the same point as the Tories, stating that, "People can't have it both ways. The simple fact of the matter is that the number of people seeking asylum in this country is at the moment in numerical terms higher than quite a number of other European countries". And further "Insofar as those people are concerned, they reckon there is something they seek here which is not available elsewhere."

Only one week after the UN's criticism, Conservative Shadow health spokesman, Dr Liam Fox said he believed the lives of hospital patients were being put at risk by the poor language skills of foreign doctors working in the National Health system, "In potential life-and-death situations having a minimum standard of proficiency in English can be fatal."



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