

The 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London

Injustice: A film by Ken Fero

Paul Bond
31 May 2001

Below we conclude our coverage of the 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival held in London recently. For an overview of the festival and other reviews see: An overview of the 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/may2001/hrw-m28.shtml>).

Since 1969 there have been over 1,000 deaths in police custody in Britain. No police officers have ever been successfully prosecuted for manslaughter. The only case which led to *any* successful prosecution was the first such death, that of David Oluwale in Leeds in 1969, when officers gave evidence that resulted in convictions related to the assault on Oluwale but *not* to his death. Since then the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has found no case to answer in all cases of deaths in police custody. This is the subject matter of Ken Fero's new film *Injustice*.

Through documentary footage and extensive interviews with the families of the victims, Fero charts the deaths of people in police custody. Shiji Lapite died in Stoke Newington police station in December 1994. His corpse showed 40 areas of injury.

Brian Douglas died during a police stop and search operation in south London. According to eyewitness accounts and medical evidence by the police's own pathologist, he was struck with full force on the top of his head. He was then held for 15 hours in Kennington police station before an ambulance was called. In hospital, he slipped repeatedly in and out of a coma. His sister Brenda, a nurse, looked at his charts as his condition worsened. "I knew," she said, "that he was already dead".

Ibrahim Sey died after having CS gas sprayed in his face at close quarters.

Police officers from the Alien Deportation Group held down Joy Gardner and wrapped 13 feet of adhesive tape around her mouth.

Harry Stanley was shot dead while carrying a table-leg in a carrier bag, which the police claimed they believed was a firearm.

Christopher Alder died face down on the floor in a police station in Hull, locked in handcuffs and with his trousers round his ankles, surrounded by police officers watching him choke. The deaths of Wayne Douglas, Roger Sylvester and Sarah Thomas are also shown.

The strongest element of the film is the way it catalogues these deaths against a more general background of police violence. A representative of the Colin Roach Centre in Stoke Newington (named after Colin Roach, shot dead in Stoke Newington police station in 1983) explained how from 1989 onwards they had dealt with two cases a week of low-level police violence.

The film is also good at detailing how the police started smear campaigns against the victims almost immediately after they had died.

The police presented Joy Gardner as a violent and dangerous woman, who posed a threat to the six arresting officers. Shiji Lapite was portrayed as a violent threat, even though he was fully restrained. The police claimed Ibrahim Sey died as a result of licking the CS spray from his face.

Injustice also presents well the state's disregard for the victim's families. A police officer visited Ibrahim Sey's widow, who was recuperating in hospital, and said, "There was a bit of a scuffle and I'm sorry to tell you he's passed away". The police would not release Brian Douglas' body for burial for months after his murder and eventually his family had to bury him without his brain.

After many years and numerous public protests, the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) finally held a conference on deaths in custody. None of the families were invited.

These are terrible stories and Fero shows the rage and frustration, and also the increasing disillusion with the police and other state agencies. We are shown the family of Brian Douglas co-operating extensively with various official bodies, only to have an inquest ignore the entire medical and eyewitness evidence and return a verdict of misadventure. Uproar followed in the court. Brian's brother, Donald, said passionately, "I do feel betrayed". He is very clear that the CPS "takes a political decision" and that it is "not in the state's interests" to prosecute police officers.

These scenes make for powerful cinema, but in Fero's hands the political lessons are wasted. Throughout the film and in discussion afterwards, Fero made it clear that all forms of struggle and lines of attack are valid, as long as they are subordinated to the United Families and Friends campaign (UFF). The film's producer, Tariq Mehmood, said that there

was no single legal or political solution on its own.

However, the filmmakers are being less than honest here.

Firstly, if anything should be learnt from the UFF campaign, it is that some forms of struggle have proven bankrupt. *Injustice* makes no mention, let alone any assessment, of the black nationalist and reformist bureaucrats who advised the families to work through the official channels. It is as if the racist, anti-Semitic Nation of Islam, Lee Jasper's National Black Caucus, Bernie Grant's African Reparations Movement and the various radical groups never existed. The film briefly shows Bernie Grant, former Labour MP for Tottenham and leader of the African Reparations Movement, at a stormy meeting in 1995 after the death of Joy Gardner. But viewing the film no one would guess the central role he played in diverting anger along safe political channels.

The Socialist Equality Party wrote of the meeting at the time: "The concrete proposals advanced were, a demand on the Home Secretary [then Conservative Michael Howard] that the 'black community' be consulted in the composition of an inquiry they hope he will set up and the establishment of a tribunal on 'Rights for black people', to be staffed by 'black solicitors and barristers'. Its purpose is also to 'put pressure on the Home Secretary to set up the Full Public Inquiry demanded by the family, and help make any case to the Human Rights Courts'. In addition, a financial appeal has been launched to 'enable us to make representations to the International Court in The Hague and to the United Nations, the European Union and the Human Rights Assemblies all over the world'."

What has been the end result of such proposals? Whilst deaths in police custody continue unabated, a small group of black career politicians has been created. This is epitomised by Lee Jasper, now the London Mayor's advisor on race relations and the police. For six years he earned up to £500 a day for participating in "racial awareness training" sessions for the Metropolitan Police.

Fero and Mehmood avoid any political reckoning with these forces. The only "political" commentator credited in Fero's film is Minkah Adobo of the African People's Liberation Front, who called for people to "highlight the human rights violation".

The filmmakers say all legal or political solutions are valid, but in reality they are very selective. In 1995, the Socialist Equality Party of Britain called a Workers Inquiry into the death of Joy Gardner. It was attended by many of the families that appear in Fero's film and by Fero himself. Our intention was precisely that of exposing the political bankruptcy of such figures of Grant and Jasper, and establishing an independent perspective for the working class. In the statement calling for the inquiry "A Workers Inquiry is needed" we explained:

"Capitalism has proved itself incapable of providing increasing numbers of workers and youth with secure and well-paid jobs or training. Basic services such as health and education are being gutted. The source of these attacks lies in the economic crisis of the profit system. Today the profits of

the bankers and transnational corporations are made only by destroying the social conditions of the working class. Unable to provide a future for millions of working people, the ruling class is turning to the methods of state terror and repression to preserve their rule.

"Black and immigrant workers make up the most oppressed section of the working class. It is for this reason that state repression is directed initially against them. But this is just the precursor of state violence against the entire working class".

In the conclusions of the Workers Inquiry we stated:

"The working class will not achieve 'justice' through the official channels. The state cannot be pressured into defending workers' rights. The only inquiry which has established the truth about a police killing was not organised by the state, or any section of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy or self-proclaimed 'black leaders'. It was an independent, working class forum..."

"The Workers Inquiry points the way forward for the working class as a whole. None of the most basic rights can be defended without a determined political struggle against the capitalist profit system, its state force and its political representatives. Workers must unite to put an end to the system which killed Joy Gardner and terrorises and oppresses millions more, and reorganise society in the interests of the majority, not to suit the profit motives of a few".

That is the only perspective that has stood the test of time. Fero need not endorse it, but there is no excuse for its omission other than political bias, given that he was in attendance.

Filmmakers do have a duty to tell the truth.

That the families see themselves in a cul-de-sac is summed up by the replies of the Douglas family to the first question in the discussion after the film, "What is the way forward?" Brian Douglas's brother said he had helped prevent an outbreak of anti-police violence at the first family demonstration. Now he says, "With hindsight it would have been better to have let it happen". His sister Brenda answered with, "Dead is dead forever, and so is wanting justice for that death. As time gets longer it can be any kind of justice".

By perpetuating the slogan of "justice by any means necessary", Fero has done the families a great injustice.

The results of the Workers Inquiry were published in book form as *A State Murder Exposed: the truth about the killing of Joy Gardner*, ISBN: 1-873045-12-3 available from Mehring Books (<http://www.mehringbooks.co.uk/contemp.htm>)

Material from the Workers Inquiry into the death of Joy Gardner can be found on the SEP web site at <http://www.socialequality.org.uk/gardner.shtml>



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact