

# Britain: Burnley hit by riots

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Burnley has become the third northern town to be hit by riots sparked by racist attacks and police provocations in the last month, following Oldham and Leeds.

On Saturday and Sunday nights, groups of white and Asian youths had clashed in the town. Petrol bombs were thrown at a pub, shops looted and several cars burnt out. The immediate cause seems to have been two incidents on Saturday night. An Asian family complained about noise coming from a party being held next door. According to local residents, the house in Francis Street, Daneshouse, Burnley's poorest neighbourhood, is normally unoccupied, but at weekends it is the scene of all-night parties. In response to the complaint, some whites at the party threatened, "We will sort you out." According to one report, a van then arrived, which local Asian residents believed had been used by the racist British National Party during the general election. ITN television news also reported a large group of white youths marching on the predominantly Asian Stoneyholme Estate.

As groups of white and Asian youths began clashing, riot police were called in, making several arrests. Elsewhere in the town, a gang of white males wielding hammers attacked an Asian taxi driver, who suffered a fractured cheekbone. As a result, cab drivers have taken their vehicles off the road, and say they will not return until they feel safe. Duncan Allan, secretary of the Burnley Private Hire Association, said, "Ninety-five percent of our member drivers are Asian and they feel very vulnerable, they are scared."

Shahid Malik, a member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee and a representative of the Commission for Racial Equality, was hit in the face with a police riot shield on Monday night and treated for concussion at Burnley General Hospital, receiving six stitches above his left eye. Malik said, "It was a completely unprovoked assault by police officers. I was

actually trying to calm down a situation which potentially was going to get out of hand." As blood poured down his face, he told a television reporter, "I was face to face with one of the officers and said, 'It's OK, there are no problems here'. Then he lifted his riot shield with the edge up and smashed it straight into my face. I was still standing and I was in shock. I said, 'What are you doing, I'm not trying to cause trouble, I'm trying to stop it.'"

His father Rafique Malik is the town's deputy mayor and witnessed the attack. He described how his son was attacked by up to four officers as he tried to defend himself. "They tried to hit him with the shield and I saw Shahid put his hand underneath it to protect himself. Three or four officers pounced on him, pinned him down and started beating and kicking him. By the time he was standing he was bleeding all over," Councillor Malik said.

The police have tried to play down the likelihood of "outside" involvement in the racist attacks that sparked off the weekend's riots. According to the police, Burnley has no history of racial tensions. Those from Asian ethnic backgrounds comprise just six percent of the town's 92,000 population. Although relatively small in number, official figures do record over five racial incidents a week over the last year in the Pennine Division, which includes Burnley.

The British National Party were active in the town in the run up to the June 7 general election, where they stood a candidate and polled 11.2 percent of the vote. This was their second highest result after nearby Oldham, where the BNP polled 16.4 percent.

Neo-fascist organisations such as the BNP have been able to capitalise on the poor conditions that confront many of Burnley's residents, white and Asian alike. They falsely claim that Asians and those from other ethnic minorities receive privileged treatment over whites when it comes to housing and other council

services. A closer examination of the social conditions in Burnley not only exposes such crude racist lies, but also shows that members of the town's ethnic minorities are more likely to suffer above average levels of unemployment and deprivation and live in areas of poorer housing with few amenities.

Social statistics produced by both the local and regional councils paint a devastating picture of town in decline, with pockets of extreme poverty. Although the unemployment level in the town matches the UK average of 3.3 percent, the decimation of the local textile industry has adversely affected the Asian population.

The area at the centre of the weekend's riots, Daneshouse, is the second most deprived ward in Lancashire and the 62nd most deprived of over 8,100 wards in England. Burnley contains three wards ranked in the poorest three percent in England. Poverty in Lancashire as a whole has risen under Labour: 12 percent of the county's wards rank in the bottom 10th of all wards in England, up from seven percent in 1999. Daneshouse is also the sixth worst in England for child poverty, and eighth worst for income deprivation

The 1999 Annual Report by the town's council notes that "wage levels are relatively low in Burnley," with "many Burnley residents" suffering "relative economic poverty". Nearly one in eight of the town's households do not contain anyone in work, ranking it third in England and over a fifth of households with children in Burnley do not contain a wage earner—the 59th highest percentage in England.

Over one third of Burnley households include someone with a long-term limiting illness—the 12th highest percentage in England. A 1995 survey found that the people of the Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale area had the worst dental health out of 178 English health districts.

The council attributes many of these health problems directly to poor housing, characterised by "large numbers of 19th century terraced houses of low value, many of which are unfit for human habitation." It continues, "The problems are also becoming worse, faster than they can be tackled. Unfitness levels are increasing, from 17 percent of private sector housing in 1992 to 27 percent now."

In the last seven years, Burnley Borough Council has made cuts totalling £3.1 million, largely as a

consequence of central government "capping" the amount of funds devolved to the town. The town hall has sought to plug the gap by raising more revenues from local residents through Council Tax, which have risen from just under a third of all income in 1994 to over half in 2000. The major area of savings the council has implemented has been by reducing its own workforce from 1,216 in 1992 to 872 in 1998, coupled with the privatisation of services such as refuse collection.

Conditions in Burnley are by no means unique. Poverty, bad health, sub-standard housing, a lack of amenities and poor local services are a daily reality for millions of working class families, the old and infirm. The resulting growth of inequality has produced social tensions throughout Britain's urban areas. Together with the right wing character of official politics—with its xenophobic treatment of asylum seekers and other "outsiders"—this creates conditions where extreme rightwing groups such as the BNP feel encouraged to spout their racist filth, and provoke clashes with immigrants and those from ethnic minorities.



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