

Britain: Heavy-handed policing provokes riots in Leeds

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The city of Leeds in West Yorkshire became the latest flash point for social tensions in Britain this week, as youth took to the streets in protest at heavy-handed policing in the area.

On the night of Tuesday June 5, between one and three hundred people fought pitched battles with police, and a number of vehicles were set on fire. According to *Radio Leeds*, hundreds of black, white and Asian youths again gathered in the largely working class Harehills area, Wednesday night. There was a high police presence and the street was closed for a period of time, but there were no further incidents. By 11pm the road was re-opened and the youth drifted off.

Nothing like it has been seen in the city since the riots in the neighbouring Chapletown district in 1981, when inner-city areas across the country exploded in protest at the indiscriminate use of "Stop and Search" laws by police. Contradictory reports have appeared in the press since the events in Leeds on Tuesday evening, but all agree that the spark for the incident was the arrest of Hossein Miah on the afternoon of Sunday June 3 for an alleged motoring offence.

According to police reports, at about 2.30pm, Miah, a 31-year-old Bangladeshi living in the Harehills area, was seen driving "erratically" along Harehills Avenue, near the junction with Spencer Place. His car was pulled over by a lone traffic cop, who checked the vehicle and allegedly found that the tax disc did not correspond with the registration number on the car.

Miah was immediately arrested, with the police officer ignoring his protests against leaving his wife, who speaks no English, and their five-month old baby in the car in what is known to be a red-light area.

The officer handcuffed Miah and squirted CS spray in his face. A crowd of at least 40 people had by now gathered to observe the arrest. One witness said: "There

was quite a lot of shouting and screaming. I thought it was going to kick off there and then. He [Mr Miah] had blood coming out of his mouth or from his lip."

As he was taken to nearby Chapletown police station, news of his arrest quickly spread and an angry crowd of about 100 mainly Asian people gathered outside the station. Fabian Hamilton, the Labour candidate for North East Leeds in the general election, had been in a meeting with local Asians while the incident was taking place and went to the police station with several community leaders.

"By the time I got to the station a crowd of about 100 men were milling around and looking threatening," Hamilton said. "They were shouting things like 'petrol bomb, petrol bomb'. There was a lot of testosterone floating around."

After visiting Miah in the station, Hamilton said, "His eyes were swollen and there were cuts and abrasions to his elbow, his lip was cut and his right wrist was swollen, but otherwise he was OK. We told the crowd this and they went home without any trouble."

Miah was released on bail, pending further inquiries. He has since registered a formal complaint about his treatment.

Speaking anonymously, a local resident told reporters, "They took this man, they arrested him, kicked him and sprayed CS gas at him in front of Asian people. That's why it started tonight. It is not a racist attack, this is because of police inaction. Police chiefs went to a meeting with locals today. As far as I know nothing happened and this is going to be all night like this."

The police dismissed any criticism of their actions. As far as West Yorkshire's Chief Constable Grahame Maxwell was concerned, "The events were criminal activity, pure and simple. We were called to the area by

reports of a petrol bomb being thrown.

“Police attended but there was no trace of any incident. However, this appears to have been the start of a premeditated attack on police.”

The events in Leeds came within a week of similar conflicts in neighbouring Bradford, and Oldham in Lancashire. This prompted an attempt by West Yorkshire police to claim that the Leeds riot was the result of “outside trouble causers,” probably from Oldham. Unlike the earlier incidents however, the disturbances in Leeds were not the result of inter-racial conflict. All reports confirm that while a majority were Asian, there were also significant numbers of black and white people involved in what was essentially a conflict between local residents and the police.

In an interview with *Radio Leeds* on Thursday, community worker Razak Raj said, “What the people on the street were saying was that the police were very heavy handed lately and this is what led to it... People are saying the police have some targets to meet, which a BBC report highlighted. People in the community have been saying for a number of months that since last year the police have targets to meet and those targets have been met by arresting the lower end of the community or people from ethnic minorities.”

The brutality of the police is exemplified by the arresting officer's use of CS spray. Although officially denied, local youth and other residents have reported the frequent use of CS spray by police in the area.

CS spray was first issued to British police forces prior to the last general election in 1997. The Labour government has since massively expanded its distribution, with most police officers now routinely carrying canisters. CS spray can be fatal. In March 1996, Ibrahima Sey, a 29-year old Gambian living in East London, was arrested at his home by officers from Forest Gate police station and taken to Ilford. Ibrahima, who suffered from mental illness, was accompanied by a friend, and went peacefully and without handcuffs in the police van.

At the police station, his friend was denied access to the custody area, leaving Ibrahima extremely agitated. A number of police officers, attempting to force him into the station, pinned him to the ground, handcuffed him and used CS spray against him. He died in police custody. An inquest into his death found that the repeated bursts of CS in his face amounted to three-

quarters of a medically recognised fatal dose.

The CS spray used in the UK is 25 times stronger than that used in many US states, where there have been numerous deaths recorded from its use. The solvent in which the CS is dissolved is Methyl Isobutyl Ketone (MiBK), commonly used in paint-stripper. It is sufficiently dangerous to be regulated by the Health & Safety Executive, which recommends an exposure limit of 10 parts in a million—equivalent to a strong smell. In the CS spray canisters, MiBK is delivered at levels thousands of times greater than this.

Occurring on the eve of the election, the events in Leeds are a stark reminder of the class tensions beneath the surface of political life. Behind the establishment declarations of apathy lays a well of discontent. Young people in particular have no outlet for their many grievances. As the Labour government presses ahead with its right wing policies and extends the social devastation already confronting workers in the impoverished inner-city areas in places such as Leeds, political alienation will only deepen, portending even more explosive reactions in the working class.



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