Britain: Bradford is fourth city hit by riots

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Last weekend, Bradford was the scene of the worst riots in Britain for nearly two decades. The clashes in the West Yorkshire city were sparked by police provocation and a build up of racial tensions fuelled by the activities of fascist organisations such as the National Front (NF) and British National Party (BNP).

This is the fourth urban area in the north of England to be hit by riots. Racist groups like the NF and BNP repeated tactics they had used recently in Oldham, Leeds and Burnley, first sparking fighting with Asian youths, and then withdrawing, leaving the streets clear for the police.

The National Front had announced plans to hold a march in Bradford on Saturday July 7. The NF is a tiny group, whose attempts to stage demonstrations in Bradford, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in England, have always met fierce local resistance. West Yorkshire Police applied to the Home Office for special powers to ban the rally by the NF, as well as counter-demonstrations by the Anti-Nazi League and the Trades Union Congress, resulting in Home Secretary David Blunkett banning all marches through Bradford for three months. The planned finale to the Bradford Festival in the city's Centenary Square on Saturday, which attracts thousands of people, was also cancelled on the grounds of a possible NF provocation. A strong police presence in the city centre that day included a large number of mounted officers.

Late Saturday afternoon, a peaceful and racially mixed rally of around 500 anti-fascists took place in Centenary Square. National Front supporters who were standing outside a nearby pub began making racist taunts.

Mohammed Amran, a regional representative of the Commission for Racial Equality, described how fighting then broke out: "We were having a peaceful demonstration. The police told everyone officers had checked the area and there wasn't an NF presence. Then some lads came out of a pub and started shouting racial abuse. Then they attacked some Asians. When I got there they were giving Hitler signals. The police wouldn't let the Asian crowd go near the pub and drew their batons. That's when the trouble started. There was a distrust among the crowd, [they believed] that the police knew there were NF supporters in the area."

Racists beat up an Asian youth outside Allinson's Bar in the town centre, which led to fighting between Asians and white racists that rapidly spiralled out of control. Police then intervened, pushing Asian youth and anti-fascist protesters away from the city centre towards the mainly Asian area of Manningham.

The worst of the violence took place on White Abbey Road, the main thoroughfare into Manningham, where by now around a crowd of some 1,000 had gathered. According to press reports, some were armed with sledgehammers and fireworks. Stones and petrol bombs were thrown at the 500-strong police lines, by now in full riot gear, with stolen cars being pushed into the advancing police vans.

At least three pubs and various businesses were severely damaged. This included Manningham Labour Club, which was firebombed. The landlord and 27 customers had to hide in the cellar as burning vehicles initially blocked off the fire exits. A BMW car showroom was set on fire, and cars were stolen from a Mitsubishi garage in Emm Lane and used to ram police and other business premises.

The police reported that a number of their officers suffered mainly minor injuries, and 36 arrests were made—13 whites and 23 Asians. After the riots, an extra 425 police officers were drafted in from forces in Greater Manchester, South and North Yorkshire, Merseyside, Humberside, Cleveland and Northumbria.

Manwar Jan Khan of Manningham Residents' Association told the press, "Clearly the blame needs to lie with the National Front. They have been extremely active in the past few months and have been keen to provoke the community into such action."

West Yorkshire assistant police chief Greg Wilkinson admitted at a press conference that police were surprised at the ferocity of the riots, vowing to track down all those involved. He stressed that police would be monitoring the situation for days to come, and up to 600 police officers patrolled the city streets on Sunday.

In the early hours of Sunday, two Asian businesses and a pub were attacked. A group of up to 30 white youths targeted an Asian restaurant and a petrol station, causing thousands of pounds worth of damage.

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The Kababeesh restaurant in the Greengates area of Bradford was attacked by a group of youths wearing Bandanas to cover their faces. Restaurant manager Tayub Amjad said he did not think the youths were NF supporters but that the attack was in retaliation for Saturday's events, "I think they were local lads because they targeted the cars of some of my workers".

According to eyewitness reports, two white men attacked the Bradford Arms pub on Manningham Lane, smashing the windows before throwing in two petrol bombs.

Though inarticulate, confused and ultimately self-defeating, the riots expresses the deep going alienation felt particularly amongst layers of young people—Asian and white—towards the political establishment and a police force that is regarded as a hostile presence which invariably ends up defending the fascists.

Bradford has a population of over 484,000, of which 18 percent are from ethnic minorities. Those whose families originally came from the Indian sub-continent—primarily from Bangladesh or Pakistan—form the largest ethnic minority group in the city. Many came to Bradford in the 1950s and 60s to work in the city's textile mills, most of which have long since closed. Unemployment and deprivation today is disproportionately higher among those with an ethnic minority background. But social disadvantage is by no means confined to the city's Asian population. In a recent government survey, *Index of Deprivation*, the majority of Bradford Metropolitan District's 30 wards were found to be among the worst-off in England. Bradford ranks sixth worst in England for unemployment and fifth worst for low incomes. Overall, Bradford is ranked 64th for deprivation out of 354 districts in England, which places the city among the top 20 percent worst-off districts in the country.

Like many urban areas, government regeneration grants of a few hundred million pounds have hardly scratched the surface of poverty and long-term unemployment, as the traditional manufacturing industries such as textiles have closed down.

Fascist groups such as the NF have exploited the social deprivation amongst poorer white working class families to whip-up racial antagonisms by alleging that Asians receive preferential treatment under multi-cultural initiatives. The Labour government is unable to effectively counter such fascist propaganda because it opposes the type of sweeping social measures that are necessary to tackle poverty and urban deprivation. Labour's only response to racist scapegoating is to impose tougher law and order measures than its Conservative predecessors, including bans on demonstrations and to flood the inner cities with huge numbers of police. The ensuing social explosions are almost inevitable, particularly given the provocative role played by the police and the media, who have provided numerous opportunities for the racists to spout their filth.

Home Secretary Blunkett denied that the heavy-handed actions of the police had played any part in provoking the rioting, which he denounced as "mindless violence". He went on to suggest that the danger of fascism came from those who promote "disorder," rather than its roots being in the degeneration of the present social system itself. "All history shows, and I mean all history, that if you allow disorder to take over from democracy, then fascism can win," he asserted.

The riots sparked by the far right are providing the pretext for the Labour government to beef up its state forces and prepare even more repressive measures. Blunkett said the police could soon be given additional powers, because their traditional "cautious" approach meant violence could be more prolonged than in countries where more hard-line methods were used. He told BBC radio, "I am keen to examine any suggestions that are put forward in circumstances where people believe they can go on the streets, threaten others including the police, and believe they can get away with it."

Marsha Singh, MP for Bradford West, said: "We will be talking to the Home Secretary about police measures, whether they need more powers in terms of public order. We may look at European models of crime controls, seven hours in White Abbey Road could have been cleared in half an hour with a water cannon."

Singh, who also told Channel 4 News that the police should not only ban the NF/BNP, but the Anti-Nazi League as well because "the price is too high", denied that rising poverty and social inequality in the city had played any role, "It was nothing to with deprivation, this was sheer criminality."

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