

Britain: The beating of Delbo King highlights police racism and brutality

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The recent court case of Delbo King, a 33-year-old black man in Manchester, England has received widespread publicity because his beating by the police was captured on CCTV cameras. The CCTV evidence was first shown during his trial on February 20.

Five officers from the Greater Manchester Police force in the Piccadilly area of the city centre beat up King in the early hours of June 1, 2003. The beating followed his arrest after he was seen damaging a bus shelter in the area and showering two women with glass. King has always acknowledged that he was drunk on the evening of his arrest and pleaded guilty to criminal damage and resisting a police officer during the incident. He pleaded not guilty to a third charge of using threatening or abusive behaviour. The prosecution later dropped the latter allegation.

The incident has been compared to the infamous police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 that sparked riots in the city.

The 20 minutes of footage in Manchester clearly shows King being sprayed with CS gas that stuns him. He is then dragged to the ground and handcuffed and repeatedly punched and kicked as he is forcibly spread-eagled and restrained on the pavement by a number of officers. The footage shows one officer swinging his leg repeatedly as he kicks an incapacitated King while he is on the ground. Another officer stands by observing the beating.

A passer by who tries to intervene can be seen in the footage and the police officers tell him to leave the scene.

When King is dragged into a police van his head is banged against the doorframe of the vehicle.

King recalls that he was kicked in the head and face several times and twice in his testicles during the attack. His injuries included bruising to his genitals and a broken tooth. Currently unemployed, he served for six years in the Parachute Regiment of the British Army including three years in Northern Ireland before leaving the army in 1995.

He intends to take out a civil case against the police, accusing them of “gratuitous violence” and acting “like they were judge, jury and executioner.” King said after the trial that, “I am sickened about the whole affair and I intend to seek justice. I am not some scumbag drug dealer—I have served Queen and

country. I admit I was drunk but I wasn’t violent towards the police and after they cuffed me that should have been the end of the matter. They seemed to enjoy what they were doing and I was kicked several times in the head and face and twice in my testicles.

“What would have happened if it was the other way round? Somebody could have died following a beating like that. How many years would somebody have got for doing that to a police officer? They should be judged under the same laws they are paid to uphold.”

Anthony O’Donnell, King’s solicitor, said, “My client accepts his behaviour was out of order but he has been the victim of gratuitous violence by the police... What happened to him was outrageous.”

King has appealed to the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) who will take up the case, including establishing whether there was a racist element to the assault. The PCA—a toothless internal monitoring body notorious for its persistent refusal to act against officers—issued a statement that the West Yorkshire Police would be investigating the incident and appealed for witnesses. The case is to be supervised by PCA member Duncan Gear and a report will be submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

Greater Manchester Police have removed just one of the five police officers involved in the attack from front line duty, but have not suspended him or disciplined him in any other way. The GMP has announced that an internal investigation will be held into the incident.

The beating of King occurred in the same week that a public inquiry under the chairmanship of former Transport and General Workers Union leader Sir Bill Morris began. The inquiry was organised following numerous allegations of “institutional” police racism that culminated in the broadcasting of “The Secret Policeman” documentary on the BBC in October last year.

In the film, an undercover journalist joined the Greater Manchester Police as a trainee police officer and encountered extreme racist views and even fascist sympathisers among the other recruits and officers. One of the recruits, Rob Pulling, donned a Ku Klux Klan-style hood at one point and threatened to go into the room of an Asian trainee officer and abuse him.

Pulling made numerous racist statements and diatribes against black and Asian people. Another of the recruits Steve Salkeld, of the Cheshire police, said he would stop a Jaguar motor car if it contained people from an ethnic minority.

After the documentary was shown it was revealed that the government was so concerned about the possible impact that it had unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the BBC from broadcasting it. Some of the recruits featured joined other police forces and some remained with Greater Manchester Police following graduation.

On March 8 the CPS announced that two trainee police officers who made racist comments could still be prosecuted, but that no criminal charges would be brought against eight other officers who were featured in the documentary also making racist comments. Seven of the eight officers have resigned from the police force since the programme was broadcast and the eighth, PC Keith Cheshire, is suspended from the North Wales constabulary. Pulling, who graduated and became an officer of the North Wales police, was the first to resign.

The Morris Inquiry is the latest to look into the ethos and attitudes of the police force in the UK. In 1999 the Macpherson inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence by a group of youths in south London 1993, published its findings, including that the Metropolitan Police (Greater London's police force) was "institutionally racist." In response the Metropolitan Police launched a £20 million programme, the Diversity Training Initiative, ostensibly designed to train all officers "in racism awareness and valuing cultural diversity."

On February 29, it was revealed that the head of this programme, Detective Chief Inspector Terry Devoil, has been sacked from the post following allegations of racist behaviour. Devoil, who has not been suspended from the police force but assigned other duties pending an investigation into the allegations, has served as an officer for more than 30 years. His responsibilities included overseeing the training of around 1,500 officers each month under the Diversity Training Initiative.

King was correct when he pointed out that "somebody could have died following a beating like that." Instances of deaths in police custody or as the result of police interventions have become a regular occurrence.

Last November it was revealed that more than 300 people have died as a result of "police action" over the past five years. The Junior Home Office minister, Hazel Blears, announced the figure in the form of an answer to a written question in the Houses of Parliament. The figure includes deaths of people in custody and as the result of police pursuits. Between 1997 and 2002, 328 people died and of these almost half—158—occurred while the individual was in, or had just left, police custody. The first year following the election of the Labour government in 1997 saw 69 deaths (more than one per week) including 11

during or following police pursuits and 40 in or following police custody. The figures fell slightly to 67 the following year in which four died in pursuits and 41 in custody. In 1999-2000, 70 people died, including 19 in pursuits and 30 in custody. In 2001-02, the last full year for which figures are available, 70 people died during or following police action with 31 occurring in pursuits and 22 in police custody.

In 1998 the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (ECPT) called for the establishment of an independent agency to investigate complaints of police brutality in England and Wales. This call was supported by Amnesty international. The ECPT stated its concerns regarding the treatment and excessive use of force by police officers in the UK. Prior to that report the ECPT went on record that it was also concerned over blatant police shortcomings in the investigation of such cases. It cited various instances of police officers not being held accountable and not being brought to justice even when victims have been awarded damages.

The same year the United Nations Committee Against Torture announced that it harboured similar concerns regarding police brutality in the UK and the fact that there existed no effective investigative mechanism to deal with allegations of police abuse as well as a failure to report publicly in a timely manner.

Amnesty International said at the time, "British Government inaction on police abuse of power has been criticised by international treaty bodies on several occasions; so far the Government has failed to act on the recommendations put forward. How many more reports will it take before the Government acts to bring police practice in line with international standards?"

The assault on Delbo King and the lumpen, racist attitudes of the officers revealed in the "Secret Policeman" documentary are merely the tip of the iceberg.

For more than two decades there has been an unrelenting onslaught against the jobs and living standards of the working class and alongside this a constant attack on democratic rights. The Blair government has continued and deepened this onslaught, introducing a raft of anti-democratic measures and legislation designed to criminalise the poor and strengthen the armed forces of the state. Collectively these measures surpass any of the anti-social legislation and policy changes passed by the last Conservative government. The persistence and growth in police brutality, abuse and racism is the product of these economic and social conditions and the highly polarised state of class relations in the UK.



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