

The Birmingham riots: Against racial politics—for class unity

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The race riots in the Lozells area of Birmingham are a stark warning of the acute social tensions existing in Britain. At the same time, they confirm the reactionary impact of the type of identity politics promoted by the race relations industry, so-called community leaders and the Labour government.

Over the weekend of October 22-23, fighting broke out in Britain's second largest city between groups of Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, resulting in one death and more than 30 serious injuries. There were also conflicts with the police, and shops, a local church and a mosque were attacked.

The following day, another man was killed, though police have so far refused to confirm any connection with the earlier disturbances.

The immediate spark for the conflict was the alleged gang rape of a 14-year-old Jamaican girl by a group of up to 18 Asian men. However, the fact that this alleged incident culminated in race riots can only be understood as the outcome of deliberate efforts to pit blacks against Asians in a struggle for scarce and dwindling resources.

Ethnic minorities make up 82 percent of the population in Lovells and Handsworth. The ward is amongst the top 10 percent of the most deprived areas nationally and has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the city, with more than 30 percent of Afro-Caribbeans and Asians unemployed.

The tensions created by such deprivation have been exacerbated by government policies that have sought to encourage the allocation of various grants and funding according to race and religion as a means of obscuring the real source of social inequality.

Sections of the Afro-Caribbean petty bourgeoisie have claimed—without foundation—that they have been less successful than Asian groups in accessing such funds and that Asians have also come to dominate shops and other forms of local business. It is these considerations, rather than genuine concern for an alleged rape victim, that motivate many of those who have played an instrumental role in events leading up to the recent disturbances.

The alleged sex attack was first reported on a local pirate black radio station and related web site on October 18, which called for protests outside the shop where the incident was supposed to have occurred.

To date, no conclusive evidence has been offered that any crime took place. Store owner Ajaib Hussein, who is said to have instigated the gang rape, has voluntarily given an interview to the police, and a forensic examination of the store found nothing.

The failure of the alleged victim to come forward has been explained by the fact that she is an illegal immigrant.

Under such circumstances, one would suppose that a genuine campaign for justice for the alleged victim would focus on demands that the police and immigration authorities agree that she and her family members would not face deportation if they come forward to testify and that she be provided with necessary medical and psychological help.

But instead of appeals for calm and a genuine search for the truth, the alleged rape has been transformed into a vehicle for the promotion of black business interests.

In a provocative and deliberately inflammatory move, the immediate response of several Afro-Caribbean organisations was to call for a general boycott of Asian businesses.

Ajaib Hussein owns a small chain selling Beauty Queens cosmetics, a range of products aimed at Afro-Caribbeans. In the week leading up to the disturbances, a number of protests were held outside his stores, as well as public meetings. The “Campaign for Silent Victims” and others initially called for a boycott of these shops, but this soon escalated to demands for a boycott of all Asian-owned hair shops in the area, then all Asian shops in Birmingham and finally into a national boycott of Asian shops.

The black web site Ligali reported on October 19, “Community outrage is growing into calls for a national boycott of Asian businesses after the alleged sexual assault on a 14-year-old African child by a gang of up to nineteen Asian men”.

Why allegations of rape in Birmingham should lead to a local boycott of Asian shops, let alone a national campaign, was never explained. Ligali simply tied the incident in with support for a “For us, buy us” campaign encouraging black workers to shop at black-owned businesses. It threatened, “You can either have us support an economic reprisal or we can sit back and watch a far more physical approach unfold...and apparently that is still not off the agenda.”

A leaflet by the Campaign for Silent Victims calling for demonstrations in Birmingham and Hackney on October 22 closed with the headline, “Supporting African businesses.” It claimed without foundation that a “wall of silence” was being maintained by the “Asian community,” before listing a series of complaints against Asian shopkeepers completely unrelated to what is allegedly a criminal action by a group of men.

“For years, African people have contributed to Asian businesses, often having to put up with being followed around the shop, poor customer service and low quality goods,” it complained. “We therefore support the community in Birmingham in calling for the national boycott of all Asian hair and beauty shops until justice is done and the wall of silence is broken. In addition, we actively encourage increased support and promotion of African-owned businesses.”

National black newspapers such as *The Voice* echoed the same theme. Reporting on the background to the boycott calls, it explained, “Another bone of contention is the visible success of Asian entrepreneurs, whose businesses virtually dominate the landscape in Handsworth, Aston and Lozells. The recent advent of the black-operated Community Roots and 3b business support enterprises has been mitigated by the inability of the growing number of black entrepreneurs to access tangible support for their business ideas.”

Making clear its own concerns, *The Voice* continued, “When added to all of this, the alleged attack on a black female minor by a group of Asian males in a chain store which has been built on the black pound, has, in the eyes of many, added insult to injury.”

Its editorial explicitly supported a boycott of Asian shops aimed at ensuring that it is black business that gets the “black pound”, declaring, “It’s time to vote with our money.”

After a cursory reference to the alleged rape, it declared, “For those of you who’ve written in to complain about being treated with disrespect and suspicion whenever you enter certain Asian-owned or run shops, we ask why then do you continue to give your patronage to these shops?”

Other self-appointed “community leaders” have also portrayed the social divisions that exist in Birmingham in racial terms—ignoring the fact that many Asian shopkeepers operate on profit margins that can scarcely sustain their families or that the majority of Asians are amongst the poorest of Birmingham’s residents.

A typical example is Maxi Hayle of the Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit, who told reporters that “a ‘them and us’ of economic success and failure in Birmingham has been ‘swept under the carpet for too long.... The reality is that the African Caribbean community don’t have the money—they don’t have the corner shops, the newsagents or even the jobs in these places.’ “

The promotion of black capitalism has been reinforced by a direct appeal to racist sentiment against Asians, as evidenced by numerous inflammatory postings on black web sites that in

turn have encouraged anti-black racist sentiment amongst Asians.

It is on the basis of this noxious mix that an appeal was made to disaffected youth to take sides in what is deliberately portrayed as an inter-community conflict. And there is little doubt that criminal elements, both black and Asian, who have been vying for control of the local drug trade, have utilised the resulting tensions.

One could not ask for a more grotesque example of the divisive role of ethnically based politics than events in Birmingham.

The response of working people must be determined first and foremost by a rejection of all efforts to sow racial divisions by manipulating social grievances.

The opportunist utilisation of the alleged rape as a political platform by the proponents of black capitalism must be condemned. The charge that Asians share some “collective guilt” for this alleged crime is a baseless and racist slander. On this issue, it is essential that conditions be created for a thorough investigation, in which the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” is upheld.

Workers and youth must also oppose any and all attempts by the government and the police to seize on divisions they have helped to create in order to push forward law-and-order measures.

The fundamental division in society is not race, but class. The social hardship facing growing numbers of black, Asian and white workers is rooted in the ongoing drive by the ruling elite to massively increase the rate of exploitation, so as to enable British capitalism to compete against its rivals and in the process to eliminate vitally needed social provisions.

To combat this, there must be a united struggle by all workers—regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or nationality—with the aim of transforming society to meet the needs of the majority, rather than the profit interests of a privileged few.



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