

Workers speak out on British riots: “The system is not viable”

Our reporting teams
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The Socialist Equality Party in Britain is campaigning for a series of meetings in the aftermath of the riots that swept large parts of London and other cities in England, following the police murder of 29-year old Mark Duggan in Tottenham on August 4.

Reporting teams from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents in the cities of Manchester and Leeds about their thoughts on the riots, police brutality and the social conditions facing working class youth. The response was in sharp contrast to the vicious right-wing campaign now underway in the political establishment and the media to justify state repression.

In Manchester, the team spoke to residents in and around Ardwick, one of the most impoverished local districts in England.

Jacob is 21 years old and works locally. A friend of his was not involved in the disturbances in the city but has been arrested for handling stolen goods—a pair of shorts.

She “only tried a pair of shorts on”, Jacob said, but the measures taken against her were extremely punitive to her and her family.

“She has two kids. Now she has lost all her benefits, her home, and they’ve given her six months in prison”, he said.

“The press and government are not saying why the riots are happening. The police are not saying why they shot that man in London. The politicians are avoiding the questions that caused the rioting. They’re closing down youth centres; they’ve stopped the Education Maintenance Allowance [paid for young people to attend college]. Even libraries are closing, and they’re not helping youth in poverty.

“The youth are saying if you kill innocent people and take away the things they need, they will react.”

Paul and Joan spoke to the reporting team outside Ardwick’s post office. Paul, 64, is a retired taxi driver. He drew a comparison between the government’s response to the disturbances and the Peterloo massacre in Manchester on August 16, 1819. This was when a rally over high unemployment and the denial of universal suffrage was attacked by the military, leaving 15 people dead and up to 700 injured.

Like then, Paul said, the government of Prime Minister David Cameron “are saying ‘we’ve brought in our own rules, we’ll show you we’re in charge’. That’s why there was defiance in 1819 at the time of the Peterloo massacre. The youngsters know there’s no future out there for them. What other way can they express themselves?

“In my day I could walk out of one job to another. My grandson says he wants to go to college but he can’t afford it.”

Joan, also retired, noted the lurid front-page headlines in newspapers that have denounced young people as “criminals”. She said, “Publicity before a trial is incriminating. They’re trying the youth before they get to court.”

Alison, a local care worker, said, “There is so little industry for people to be involved in. Those in employment today don’t have rights, and all the things our grandfathers and grandmothers fought for in terms of fair pay and workers’ rights, all those things have been gradually eroded away. But that’s the system. Capitalism demands you have a large pool of unemployed workers to keep it going.

“The situation today is very frightening. I work in a community centre down the road. We had a youth centre that was supported by the Manchester Youth Service. It’s been closed down. The worker who was

employed by the council has come back as a volunteer to run that. But he can only do it for so long. It was set up initially through local parents setting up a youth group. They couldn't cope so the council stepped in and that's been a fixture for as long as I have worked here, which is 18 years.

"Now that is threatened with closure, we have to run around finding little bits of money to keep it going. It's a locally funded scheme that relies on a lot of voluntary support. That's the sort of thing where young people around here have somewhere to go. It's not very much but what they are faced with now is cuts in social services.

"Surely there has to be an economic system that treats everybody more fairly? I work with people who have serious mental health problems. They are being referred to Accident and Emergency at hospital for help. The most fragile people in society are sent to such a horrific place, and it frightens me the way services are being decimated.

"The more that services close, the more mental health workers will be put under pressure. We have had benefits and services cut to the bone. People with anxiety are sent these letters demanding they attend work-based assessment interviews. That is a huge stress for someone suffering from depression and the support isn't there for them to be able to work anyway."

A team campaigned in Leeds at a shopping centre on the border between the racially-mixed areas of Chapeltown and Harehills. They were received warmly and had many discussions about the recent riots and the response of the government and the media.

Ben, a young worker, told the WWS, "The situation with the youth is that they are caught between three facts, arising one after the other.

"The first is the economic turmoil that we are living in right now, and the recession caused by the bankers. The second one is the cuts that people are sensing. The third one is the attitude of the police to the youth. I think the solutions are there but we should start by making people aware of the situation that caused this."

Eemani, a young mother of two children, said the riots were "about cause and effect. I think it is the by-product of living in a violent and oppressive society. It's apparent all the time, in TV, in the media. There is also a real culture of judgement and oppressing people."

Asked what she thought about the response of politicians and the media to the riots she replied, "I think it's crazy. The government, the papers and the TV are calling for more and more oppressive measures. But firstly, the riots are not the real issue. You need to go deeper than that. You need to look at all society and how we are living as a whole and what we have to do so people can live freer, better lives."

"I think people are frightened. That fear translates to children. Why are little children wearing balaclavas and going out and smashing things; because they feel bullied. If you feel bullied you want to bully back.

"Politicians stopped listening a long time ago. I follow their debates promoting far right measures and they say, 'We need to get the army in. We need national service'. Where are our leaders, our Nelson Mandela's, our Martin Luther Kings? We don't have them. The politicians have been ripping off their expense payments. They are greedy, they are self-serving and then they wonder why the rest of society says, 'Well! I'll have a go at that!'

"We have to look after our children. You lead by example. Parents are constantly being blamed and marginalised. They should inject some money into society, starting with all the money they are spending on wars. Instead, they are calling for more people to be stuck in prison with longer sentences. But the prisons are full and they don't work. So what are they going to do? Send little children into prison? You keep kicking a dog and one day it is going to turn round and bite. They are going to have a whole generation of children who are raised hating the state.

"It can't go on like this. The system is not viable. It is causing destruction all over the world, just to keep a tiny minority in luxury."



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