

Bristol riots in Britain—A Tale of Two Cities

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Bristol, the sixth largest city in England with a metropolitan population of one million people, witnessed two nights of rioting on Monday and Tuesday last week. According to the *Bristol Evening Post*, hundreds of young people were involved in the areas of St Paul's, Montpelier, St Werburgh's, Kingswood, Stokes Croft and Cabot Circus shopping centre. Eyewitness accounts indicate the incidents erupted separately and were not the result of one group moving from one place to another.

As of Monday, a total of 49 people have been questioned about the riots and 20 charged in the police's "Operation Relentless". Although the operation has been in effect since 2005, it appears to have been stepped up recently. According to *The Week-in*, which covers East Bristol and North Somerset, police "kicked off their two-week Operation Relentless" two weekends before the riots and made an "impressive start", using Twitter to broadcast live updates of their progress.

"Throughout last weekend district officers were joined by specialist dog handlers and other staff targeting anti-social behaviour hotspots, carrying out drug searches and checking on pubs and off-licences," *The Week-in* added.

Bristol has a long history of social anger being expressed on its streets. Earlier this year, riots occurred in the Stokes Croft area over a brutal police operation to evict squatters. The St. Paul's area of the city saw rioting in 1980, against a background of high unemployment, deterioration of race relations, poor housing, high levels of poverty and oppressive police use of stop-and-search laws.

The response of the political establishment and media to the eruption of social anger has been to demonise those involved as "violent thugs", "hooligans" or "a wolf pack of feral inner-city waifs and strays" so as to avoid any examination of their real socio-economic

causes.

Barely a year ago, before last May's general election, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg warned that attempts to slash and burn public services by an incoming Conservative government elected on the narrowest of margins would cause riots. Clegg is now deputy prime minister and his party is in coalition with the Conservatives in enforcing austerity measures against the population.

That is why Stephen Williams, Liberal Democrat MP for Bristol West, denounced the disturbances as "completely unjustified", and motivated solely by "theft and opportunism."

Similarly, Jack Lopresti, Conservative MP for Filton and Bradley Stoke, demanded that those involved in the riots must be "met with the full force of the law." It was his party, which in July 2008 said there was a "subculture of poverty, deprivation and alienation from society" in Bristol and that the city resembled a "Charles Dickens-style *Tale of Two Cities*."

As with the Labour Party nationally, Bristol South Labour MP Dawn Primarolo called for an expansion of police powers and numbers to deal with the unrest. Seeking to outflank the Tories on the right, she criticised police funding cuts as a result of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review, demanding more police on the streets.

The hypocrisy of the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Labour Party bemoaning the lack of respect for "law and order" knows no depths. They are all implicated in the scandal surrounding the multi-billionaire media baron Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, involving phone hacking on an "industrial scale" and the bribing and blackmailing of police officers.

For decades these same parties have been the vehicle for imposing the diktats of Murdoch and other financial oligarchs. That is why they refuse to address the issues of police brutality, social deprivation and

unemployment that are behind the riots, and which they are entirely responsible for creating. Instead, the political establishment and the state apparatus are meting out vicious class justice against young people accused of rioting, attempting to crush the social anger that is exploding due to rising levels of social inequality.

According to Bristol City Council data, 27 percent of children in Bristol (or 21,915 children) live in poverty. In Williams's Bristol West constituency in the Lawrence Hill ward, nearly 60 percent of children live in poverty. Fifty-eight percent of households are "income deprived", i.e., unemployed and/or relying on Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance or various Tax Credits to survive.

In Ashley a staggering 93 percent of children live in poor households, and half of the population is "income deprived". To the north of the city in Southmead, half of all people are also "income deprived" and 37 percent of children live in poverty.

These figures are in stark contrast to more affluent neighbourhoods—just over one percent are "income deprived" in Stoke Bishop, and two percent in Westbury-on-Trym.

The housing situation in Bristol is also deplorable, with Bristol City Council figures showing that there are nearly 14,500 households on the Bristol Housing Register attempting to find somewhere to live with only 2,500-3,000 vacancies available each year.

On top of the existing misery, in 2010 Bristol City Council outlined cuts of £22 million dubbed "Bristol's biggest ever". Further cuts totalling £50 million are promised by 2014.

Bristol City Council leader Barbara Janke (Liberal Democrat) said, "It was clear to us more than a year ago that whichever party or parties won the general election in May, there would have to be massive spending cuts by local councils."

It is no coincidence that in a city that has experienced three riots this year that such huge levels of inequality exist. Not only are the riots a reflection of social deprivation and exclusion in Bristol but also of the political disenfranchisement of the working class.

The Labour Party and trade unions have long since abandoned any pretence at defending the interests of the working class. The Labour Party is directly responsible for the appalling high levels of poverty and

inequality in Bristol and elsewhere, while the trade unions have not lifted a finger in opposition to the government's austerity measures.



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