

Pervasive unemployment and poverty in London areas hit by riots

Paul Stuart**16 August 2011**

The British political establishment and its state apparatus are imposing the most vicious class justice against young people accused of involvement in the riots that swept London and other cities last week, following the police killing of 29-year-old father of four Mark Duggan.

Nearly 3,000 people have so far been arrested as police continue to raid homes across the capital. Already, almost half of these have been dragged before kangaroo courts with barely any pretence of due process. Despite the fact that most have no previous convictions, more than two thirds of those rounded up are being held without bail and subject to punitive custodial sentences.

Collective punishment is now the order of the day, as whole families face eviction from council housing in a fundamental assault on their democratic and social rights.

The family of 18-year-old youth Daniel Sartain-Clark, from Battersea, South London, is the first to have been served with an eviction notice. This is despite Sartain-Clark pleading innocent to charges of involvement in the riots in neighbouring Clapham.

His mother, Maite De La Calva, accused the police of beating up her son and his girlfriend. "It was brutal the way Daniel was treated", she said. "My child and J-Niel [Daniel's girlfriend] were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were being stupidly curious.... The police have made mistakes. They have beaten two children up."

Daniel, his mother and 14-year-old sister face homelessness. Calva has made clear the family has nowhere to go. Not only are they unable to afford the astronomical rents in the private sector—especially under conditions where the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is cutting housing

subsidies as part of its £80 billion package of austerity measures. But a campaign is underway to block legislation designed to protect people against destitution from being used to provide emergency accommodation to those evicted.

The Conservative leader of Wandsworth council, Ravi Govindia, said the eviction notice against Calva and her children was only the start. Local authority "officers will continue to work with the courts to establish the identities of other council tenants or members of their households as more cases are processed in the coming days and weeks," he threatened.

Labour-controlled councils in other parts of the capital, and in Manchester, the West Midlands and elsewhere, are following suit. In Manchester, the Labour-controlled city council has said it plans to evict the family of a 12-year-old boy accused of stealing a bottle of wine from a supermarket during the disturbances.

The hypocritical, bought-and-paid-for politicians of all three parties justify these draconian measures by claiming that housing and other social entitlements are "a privilege, not a right".

They insist that the riots have nothing to do with the social deprivation, unemployment and police brutality experienced daily by many working class youth. It is solely the outcome of "criminality" by "feral" youth.

These self-serving slanders are disproved by social conditions in the areas affected by the disturbances, especially in London. Almost two thirds of the capital's 33 boroughs were affected. They share several things in common—they are overwhelming working class areas, including some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. And it was mainly young people aged between 16 to 24 years of age that

were involved.

National rates of unemployment for this age group are already running at 20 percent—one quarter of whom have been unemployed for at least 12 months. In many of the areas affected by the riots, the jobless rate is far higher, as those aged between 16 and 18 years old do not receive unemployment benefits.

Those in work are hardly faring any better. Forty percent of working youth are precariously employed in the service sector hit hard by the global recession. The overwhelming majority of young workers are paid minimum wage rates: £5.93 for workers aged 21 and over, £4.92 for 18-20-year-olds, £3.64 for 16-17-year-olds, down to just £2.50 for apprentices under the age of 19.

This situation is the direct responsibility of the Labour Party, which was in government for most of these young people's lives. It is worsening dramatically under the coalition government as it imposes the burden of the massive billion-pound bailout of Britain's banks onto workers and youth.

In the last months, thousands of young people have been barred from higher education by the tripling of university tuition fees to £9,000 introduced by the government, and the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance that many working class youth relied on to attend college.

Young people are receiving a further hammer blow as services directed towards helping them to maintain health and welfare and assist them into work have been targeted by council budget cuts. Other public provisions, such as libraries, sports centres, youth clubs and various counselling and employment advice specialists, are to be gutted.

Save the Children reported in February that 1.6 million children throughout the country live in poverty. "Children up and down the country are going to sleep at night in homes with no heating, without eating a proper meal and without proper school uniforms to put on in the morning," it said.

In the borough of Haringey, where Tottenham is situated, the unemployment rate is 28 percent. In June, the number of new jobs in the borough had fallen by 50 percent since 2009, leaving 54 people chasing every vacancy.

The Labour-controlled council is forcing through budget cuts of £84 million out of a total budget of £273

million over the next three years. In 2009-2010, council authorities spent £3.4 million on youth services. This is to be reduced to £1 million. Eight of Haringey's 13 youth clubs have been closed down, and on April 1, youth counselling services in the borough were closed. The council is also sacking 1,000 employees from its 4,600 workforce.

Hackney, also the scene of confrontations between the police and youth, is one of the most deprived areas in England, where 44 percent of children live in poverty.

Disturbances also took place in Tower Hamlets, to the east of the City of London, where youth unemployment is 25.3 percent—one in four. The local authority is run by a coalition of "independents" led by Mayor Lutfur Rahman, a former member of the Labour Party. Rahman, who was backed by George Galloway's Respect party in recent elections, has announced cuts of £72 million in the local authority's budget, with children's centres and facilities for the mentally disabled particularly affected.

Other areas where disturbances occurred have similarly high levels of youth unemployment—26.3 percent in Greenwich, 21.8 percent in Southwark and 22.5 percent in Croydon. In the last quarter, employment for 16-24-year-olds fell by 101,000. This is a direct outcome of cuts in jobs and freezes on recruitment in both the public and private sectors.



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