

The ex-left and the British riots

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The riots that swept London and other cities earlier this month threw a harsh light on the real state of social relations in Britain. They revealed the extent to which the UK is a nation torn apart by intractable class divisions, in which millions of workers and young people have no escape from a life of grinding, unrelenting poverty while they are forced to watch others live a life of unparalleled luxury.

Thousands of youth rioted because they have no avenue through which to articulate their grievances or realise their aspirations for a better life—least of all through the Labour Party and the trade unions, which are as much the corrupt playthings of the financial elite as the governing Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. There is a degrading situation that has continued year after year without change, or even the apparent possibility of change, because the entire social and political order is stacked in the interests of the super-rich.

The universal response of the state, the political establishment and the media to the riots has confirmed that nothing else can be expected from the ruling elite and its hangers-on. Brutal police repression, mass arrests and the doling out of punitive prison terms for minor offences have been accompanied by a blanket denial that legitimate social grievances played any part in the riots. They were, according to the official narrative, solely the product of a criminal “underclass.”

For this reason, the riots were not merely an exposure of what exists but a portent of the future. They demonstrate above all that for the working class and the younger generation, nothing can be achieved outside of the revolutionary overthrow of the existing system. They also served another essential political function—revealing the plethora of fake-left groupings that portray themselves as “socialist,” “communist” and even “Trotskyist” to be the champions of capitalist “law and order.”

Morning Star, newspaper of the Communist Party of Britain, thundered, “Homes and businesses must be protected, which means that police have to have resources to contain violent outbreaks.”

As the numbers arrested in police sweeps climbed above 2,000, the *Morning Star* on August 11 complained bitterly that Prime Minister David Cameron had “stubbornly dismissed calls to rethink police budget cuts.” The Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition government was worse “than even that of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s,” it said, because of its “willingness to antagonise the police” through budget cuts.

The Socialist Party (SP), a long-term political ally of the Stalinists, echoed this law-and-order rhetoric. Deputy General Secretary Hannah Sell, writing in the group’s newspaper, *The Socialist*, complained, “Belatedly, government ministers have dragged themselves back from their holidays in order to try and ‘restore order’.”

Sarah Sachs-Eldridge wrote, “There is widespread anger that the police did not act effectively to defend people’s homes and local small businesses and shops.”

She quoted sympathetically the comments of Paul Deller of the Metropolitan Police Federation that “Morale among the police officers dealing with this incident, and within the police service as a whole, is at its lowest level ever due to the constant attacks on them by the Home Secretary and the government in the form of the reviews into police pay and conditions.”

The Socialist Party went on to heap praise on the “action of local shopkeepers mobilising to defend business premises and homes in a number of areas during the rioting.... Had the riots continued, these initiatives could have been developed into democratically organised, mass, united defence of communities, with elected organising committees.” This perspective has far more to do with fascism than

with the working class and socialism.

The same stance was taken by numerous other groups and publications. The *Weekly Worker* complained of youth having “wreaked wanton destruction” and of the “anti-social gangs that lurk on our council estates.” It too praised small shopkeepers who had “succeeded in driving away the rioters” as a model for the “left” to “build permanent self-defence units” to “provide our own protection against rioters, looters, English Defence League hoodlums and—yes—police thuggery.”

The apologetic reference to “police thuggery” is transparent political window-dressing for the call to restore order.

The ex-left groupings differ from the Tory right and the bourgeois media only in their claim that strikes and protests organised by the trade unions are a legitimate alternative to rioting that is available to working people and youth. The Socialist Party urged that “trade union leaders” respond to the riots by organising “a united day of strike action” against spending cuts.

Such statements are a conscious deception. The youth did not rise up merely because of recent inaction by the trade unions. Trade union membership, which stands nationally at around 20 percent, is virtually non-existent today among young people, many of whom will never even have a job. This is not merely because union leaders have done nothing to oppose the attacks of the present coalition government. They have not organised a single significant industrial struggle since they betrayed the year-long national miners’ strike in 1984-1985.

For more than a quarter of a century, the unions have collaborated in a historic transfer of societal wealth from the poor to the super-rich and a narrow, wealthy layer of the upper-middle class. The latter is the privileged social layer represented by the “trade union leaders.” And it is this same layer for which the ex-left groups speak.

Their leading lights are, for the most part, either firmly ensconced within the trade union apparatus—often at the highest level—or in academia and various local government departments. They do not genuinely view the unions as an agent of social change, but as the best means of suppressing the class struggle and safeguarding the existing order. They employ socialist phraseology only in order to oppose any movement that threatens to break out of the political

and organisational straightjacket of the trade union bureaucracy.

The Socialist Party made this abundantly clear when they urged the “trade union movement” to “call for control of the police to be placed under the auspices of democratically elected local police committees” and to “demand the setting up of a democratically run inquiry into the riots involving elected representatives of trade unions and community organisations, that could also set the parameters on how the offences are dealt with, with the right to review sentences already imposed.”

Patrolling the streets, negotiating with the police, determining sentencing—such are the political ambitions of the ex-left. Workers and young people should take note. This was their response to a few nights of rioting. In the event of the emergence of a serious revolutionary threat to capitalism, these forces will take their stand on the side of the ruling class and its repressive state apparatus.

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