

Fatal police shooting sparks riot in north London

Julie Hyland
8 August 2011

Rioting broke out in Tottenham, north London on Saturday night, following protests over the shooting death of Mark Duggan, a 29-year old father of four, who was killed by police on Thursday.

Duggan was in a taxicab on his way to visit his fiancée in the early evening when police stopped it. Members of an anti-firearms unit were accompanied by officers from the Specialist Firearms Command (CO19) in what has been described as a “pre-planned operation.”

There are conflicting accounts of what followed. Police claim that Duggan opened fire, narrowly missing an officer, and was shot in self-defence. However, eyewitnesses have reported that Duggan was shot as he lay on the ground. He died instantly.

Duggan’s fiancée, Semone Wilson, said she had received a text message from him shortly before he was killed. “At about 6pm he sent out a message on his BlackBerry saying ‘The Feds are following me’, and that’s it. That’s the last time anyone heard from him.”

His brother, Shaun Hall, said that Mark was a “family man” and described claims that he had opened fire on police as “rubbish. Mark’s not that sort of person. He’s not stupid to shoot after police, that’s ridiculous.”

The family say they have not had any explanation from police of why Duggan was shot. His killing has been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), a toothless body whose main purpose is to cover up evidence of police brutality.

On Saturday afternoon, family and friends held a protest outside Tottenham police station. Upwards of 200, mainly young people, participated in the demonstration to demand “Justice for Mark Duggan.”

Police have conceded that the protest was peaceful. However, they claim that, after several hours of protest, at approximately 8:30 p.m., a group of youth began

attacking police cars parked in the street.

Other accounts report that the disturbances were sparked when a young female protester was struck by a police officer with his baton.

One woman told journalists, “It started out as a peaceful demonstration. The police shot a guy here last week and they lied about what happened. They said he pulled a gun but he wouldn’t have done that with armed police. They shot him so badly that his mother could not recognise him.”

Some 500 people, mainly youth, were involved in clashes with police, centring on the main high street in Tottenham.

Police claim that, although aware that tensions were running high following Duggan’s killing, they were completely unprepared for what followed.

This account is belied by the fact that the capital’s notorious Territorial Support Group (TSG) was on standby as part of “contingency” plans. It was TSG officers who were involved in the attack on Ian Tomlinson, an innocent bystander, during protests around the G20 summit of world leaders in London in April 2009. He died shortly afterwards. Another TSG officer was caught on video during the same demonstrations launching an unprovoked attack on a female protester, Nicola Fisher. Despite video evidence of the assault, the Crown Prosecution Service announced he would not face any charges.

Moreover, the Metropolitan Police were sufficiently prepared to be able to set up a Gold Command structure early on in the evening—used in the case of major operations, including suspected terrorist incidents.

Hundreds of riot police and vans were soon in the area, accompanied by mounted police and a police helicopter overhead.

Crowds gathered, many chanting at the police “we

want answers” and “whose streets? Our streets.”

There are several reports of police carrying out mounted charges against onlookers, causing panic, in scenes similar to those that accompanied the student protests in London at the start of the year.

The rioting continued until Sunday morning with reports of police cars, a passenger bus and shops being set alight and police being pelted with stones, eggs and bottles.

Some 48 people have so far been arrested, and there are reports of 29 injuries.

Many commentators have drawn parallels with the riots that broke out in Tottenham in October 1985. Then, as now, their immediate cause was police brutality. On October 5 that year, police in Tottenham detained 24-year old Floyd Jarrett, an unemployed black youth, on suspicion of stealing a car.

The police then carried out a raid on the home of Floyd’s mother, 49-year old Cynthia Jarrett, at the Broadwater Farm housing estate, in the course of which Mrs. Jarrett collapsed and died of a heart attack. Her family claimed that police had pushed Mrs. Jarrett out of the way, causing her to fall. She died within 15 minutes of the incident.

Angry protests followed at Tottenham police station. The Broadwater Farm public housing estate was placed on lock-down, and surrounded by riot police. They were met with barricades and petrol bombs. During the disturbances a police officer was attacked with a machete and killed.

Winston Silcott, Mark Braithwaite and Engin Raghup were arrested and convicted of the police officer’s death in a frame-up trial in 1987. Their convictions were subsequently quashed on appeal in 1991, after forensic tests proved their confessions had been fabricated.

The Tottenham riots were part of a series of rebellions that swept many cities in England during the 1980s. Just one week before the Broadwater Farm disturbances, young people in Brixton, south London erupted after police shot 37-year old West Indian mother, Cherry Groce. She was wounded as police raided her home looking for her son, Michael. Mrs. Groce was left paralysed from the waist down. Inspector Douglas Lovelock, who shot Mrs. Groce, was subsequently cleared of malicious wounding.

The police violence that sparked these incidents was

inextricably connected to the Thatcher Conservative government’s assault on the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of workers and youth in Britain.

The 1985 disturbances broke out just months after the defeat of the year-long miners’ strike, which had seen pitched battles between pickets and police as the Thatcher government sought to dismantle the nationalised mining industry, with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

The £80 billion austerity programme of cuts now being implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government dwarfs anything attempted by Thatcher. Moreover, they come after three decades in which workers and young people have seen their wages and living standards stripped to the bone, while the super-rich and international financiers have enjoyed record levels of wealth.

While interviewing local people, Raf Sanchez for the *Telegraph* reported, “most seem to agree that the riot was a long time coming and not just a reaction to the Mark Duggan shooting. ‘You had a tinderbox that was waiting and that was just the match,’ says one woman. ‘It’s frustration by young people who have been pushed to the wall. Most of them are NEETs [Not in Education, Employment or Training], they can’t read and write and they have got nothing to lose.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact