

What do the repressive measures imposed in the UK portend?

Robert Stevens
6 September 2011

An unprecedented assault on democratic rights has been mounted in the month since the outbreak of rioting in several major British cities. The riots were an eruption of pent-up social anger sparked initially by the police execution of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old father of four, on August 4 in Tottenham, north London.

Since then, hysterical press coverage and bloodthirsty calls for retribution have been the order of the day. All previous criteria for sentencing have been abandoned, with the government sending down a directive for the courts to rip up the rulebook. A document, authored by the Metropolitan Police in London, instructed investigating officers that those arrested were not to be released, but to be held in custody, even for minor offences.

More than 3,000 people have already been arrested in London, Birmingham, Manchester and other towns and cities in a massive police dragnet, often for the pettiest of misdemeanours. In London, over 2,000 have been detained and more than 1,300 charged, including hundreds of juveniles. Some people have been sentenced to years in jails.

Children as young as 11 years of age have been brought before the courts. Others have been stripped of their right to anonymity.

Entire districts have been sealed off as police carry out massive raids. The Metropolitan Police have said that they plan to arrest around 30,000 people. To this end, plans are in place to vastly expand prisons, which have now reached full capacity.

The services of the intelligence agency MI5 and the government's GCHQ spying headquarters have been enlisted.

The police have resorted to breaking into social network web sites and the Blackberry instant messaging service. Talks are ongoing between the

government and social network providers to restrict their use in Britain. A number of those arrested have, as a condition of their bail, been instructed not to use social network sites.

The principle of familial and collective punishment has been legitimated: whole families have been denied the right to social housing and public services after one of their relatives was accused of rioting.

The most sinister manifestation of this state crackdown has been the increase in the number of people killed by the police. In the space of just one week from August 16, three people were killed by police nationally, as a result of the use of Taser weapons and pepper spray. As is now the norm, such murders are carried out with impunity.

How is one to account, for what appears on the surface to be such an overwhelming and disproportionate response to a few days of rioting?

The main political parties, the judiciary, the police and the media are all adamant that there are no broader social reasons for these events, and that those "brought to justice" must be dealt with purely on a criminal basis. Prime Minister David Cameron even launched an attack on the BBC for daring to suggest there may be some wider, underlying causes to the rioting. Cameron said, "Some people almost say that until we deal with the problem of inequality in our society, there is nothing you can do to deal with rioting."

In reality Cameron and the British capitalist class know full well that the riots are only an initial, politically inchoate expression of seething social discontent amongst broad layers of the working class. But they fear that even acknowledging this reality would place a question mark upon the capitalist system and their right to rule.

The riots have shown that Britain is a tinderbox, in

which major social upheavals can be sparked by a myriad of class tensions. Britain is already the most unequal society in Western Europe. Over the past two decades, it has witnessed a historically unprecedented shift in social wealth from the poorest layers in society to the richest. As a result of the 2008 bailout of the British banks, more than £1 trillion pounds in taxpayer money was looted by the Labour government and handed over to the major financial institutions. The chasm between the rich and the rest of society is widening yet further as a result of the £100 billion cuts programme being imposed by the government.

Nearly 2.5 million are officially unemployed, with the true figure nearer to six million. Of these almost one million are young people. Another one million youth are now classified as being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs). Twenty people are chasing each available job in 22 of London's 73 parliamentary constituencies. In poorer areas of the capital such as Peckham and Hackney there are over 40 people unemployed for each job.

Data published by the *Financial Times* on Monday, based on the court papers of more than 300 of those brought before courts in London, found that two thirds of all suspects live in neighbourhoods with below-average income.

For the past quarter century, social and political tensions have been stifled—primarily by the trade unions. Both the riots and the eruption of protests nationally last autumn by students opposing education cuts demonstrated that it is those sections of the population least under the control of the trade unions that are most likely to give expression to growing mass discontent.

However, this situation cannot and will not continue. The social chasm between the super-rich and the vast majority is unsustainable. Conditions are being created for the emergence of mass social struggles, which trade unions and the Labour Party, justly reviled as tools of big business, will not be able to contain.

The ruling class knows this and has set in place measures historically associated with police states. However, this abandoning of all the norms of democratic rule provides an objective impulse for an escalation in the class struggle, and a turn by the working class to a struggle for socialism.

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