

Julie Hyland addresses Berlin election campaign rally

Julie Hyland
23 September 2011

On September 17, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party—PSG) held a European workers rally against racism, war and social cutbacks at the conclusion of the party's election campaign in Berlin. Representatives of the PSG and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) spoke on the crisis of capitalism, the programme of the PSG and the significance of the PSG election campaign.

In the coming days we will be publishing the most important contributions at the rally. The third is from Julie Hyland, a member of the WSWs Editorial Board and of the executive committee of the British Socialist Equality Party. The WSWs published the speeches of ICFI Secretary Peter Schwarz on September 21 and of PSG candidate Christoph Dreier on September 22.

The PSG made the riots that swept across London and other cities in England at the start of August a central feature of its election campaign here in Berlin.

This was a correct and principled decision because the riots and the reaction to them were by no means a peculiarly “British” event.

Rather, they speak to the acute social tensions that are building up in every country and the draconian measures that are being prepared in response by the ruling elite.

The immediate trigger for the rioting was the police killing of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, north London on August 4. Duggan, a 29-year old father of four, was shot twice after armed police stopped a taxi he was a passenger in.

Duggan is one of 300 or so people that have died in police custody over the last decade. Many of you will know the name Jean Charles de Menezes.

He was the innocent young Brazilian worker who was shot dead in broad daylight on the London subway in July 2005, as part of the so-called war on terror. De Menezes was killed without warning, with seven bullets fired at point blank range into his head by plain clothes police.

No police officer was jailed for his death. In fact, no police officer has been successfully prosecuted in any of the 300-plus other cases. After de Menezes was killed, it was discovered that the police had covertly implemented a shoot-to-kill policy on London's streets, which remains in force to this day.

Just as in the case of de Menezes, Duggan's killing was followed by police disinformation—claiming that Duggan had opened fire, and they shot him in self defence. This was a lie.

Widespread skepticism as to the police account led to a protest outside Tottenham police station two days after Duggan's death. Rather than getting any answers, however, protestors were attacked by police, sparking a wave of disturbances across the capital, and then other cities in England.

That they spread so quickly speaks to the fact that police brutality, injustice and social deprivation are daily facts of life for many working class youth.

Yet the political establishment and the media insist the riots had no social causes.

Instead, they slandered working class youth as “feral rats”, a “criminal underclass” infesting British inner-cities. No one amongst the political establishment addressed the obvious issue—if Britain has produced an entire generation of young criminals, then it points to something profoundly rotten in society.

The real aim of this propaganda was to legitimize state repression. Prime Minister David Cameron made clear nothing was off the table—including potentially the use of water cannon and the army. He was supported by Labour leader Ed Miliband, as the numbers of police in the capital were tripled, and entire working class neighbourhoods were put on virtual lock-down.

Within a week, some 3,000 mainly young people had been rounded up in police raids, many of whom were dragged before kangaroo courts, some sitting in 24 hour sessions, to dispense “summary justice”.

Legal norms—including the presumption of innocence—have been jettisoned. Most of those arrested have been charged and imprisoned for the most menial of offences. People charged with stealing an ice-cream cone, or taking £3.50 worth of bottled water, for example, have been imprisoned for six months. Two young people were imprisoned for four years for Facebook postings supportive of the riots, even though their postings were not responsible for any disturbances.

Collective punishment is now the order of the day, with whole families threatened with eviction from their social housing and the removal of welfare benefits if any relation was involved in the disturbances.

In a further sinister development, the police sought to break into social networking sites and the Blackberry instant messaging services. This from the same ruling elite that routinely sings the praises of the social media for undermining governments in other countries when it suits its foreign policy interests—as in Iran or Syria for example.

Throughout this time, not a single so-called “left” or “independent” figure spoke out against state repression. Labour's Ken Livingstone, once known as “Red Ken”, called for the use of water cannon, while supposed “liberals” demanded the state respond harshly against those involved.

The same line was taken by ex-left petty bourgeois groups, such as the Stalinist Communist Party and the Socialist Party. Echoing the right-wing media and politicians, they lined up behind the police state measures being implemented, attacking the government for cutting police numbers and denouncing its laxness in restoring “law and order”.

The hypocritical denunciations of working class “criminality” by the likes of Cameron are sickening.

Only weeks before the disturbances erupted, the government and the police were embroiled in a political crisis around phone hacking and other criminal practices by Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*. The scandal had exposed that Cameron, and much of the political establishment, are nothing more than the political bagman for this multi-billionaire arch-reactionary.

Murdoch's corporation stands accused of mafia-style crimes—including the systematic bribery of police officers and blackmail of public figures. But in sharp contrast to the treatment meted out to working class youth in the last weeks, not one person from Murdoch's empire, nor a single police officer, has been charged with any offence, let alone prosecuted.

The stench of lawlessness and corruption that pervades ruling circles in Britain doesn't end there. The same politicians who now posture as the guardians of the nation's "morality" stand guilty of commissioning and sanctioning war crimes—from illegal wars of aggression in Afghanistan, Iraq and now Libya, to extraordinary rendition and torture.

In the last months, leaked documents have revealed extensive discussions between the Labour government of Tony Blair and the oil companies in the run up to the war against Iraq, in which the energy giant BP, amongst others, were promised they would soon get their hands on the country's huge oil reserves.

They are at it again in Libya. Secret documents found in Tripoli expose the lie that NATO's bombing of Libya has anything to do with humanitarian concerns or democratic rights. They confirm that for years Britain's intelligence forces collaborated with the Gaddafi regime in the interrogation and torture of those considered to be his opponents.

MI6 was directly involved in the extraordinary rendition of Islamist leader Abu Munthir and aided the CIA in the rendition of Abdelhakim Belhadj to Libya where they were tortured with British approval.

Amongst the documents found in Tripoli was a letter from Sir Mark Allen, then MI6 director of counter-terrorism, to the Gaddafi regime in 2004. Belhadj's rendition was "the least we could do for you and for Libya to demonstrate the remarkable relationship we have built over recent years," he wrote.

Shortly after writing that letter, Sir Mark Allan left MI6 to work for BP, which is now jostling for position in Libya. Consequently, Belhadj is amongst those that the British government now praise as Libyan freedom fighters, as NATO implements a policy of violent regime change aimed at taking possession of Libya and its oil reserves.

It is striking that the same self-styled "liberals" and so-called "lefts" who attacked the "criminality" of working class youth in London, are the biggest cheerleaders for imperialist intervention against Libya. There is virtually nothing to distinguish these layers from the more overt right wing reactionaries they once claimed to oppose.

This is a hugely significant development, which is rooted in the same class polarisation that produced the inner-city disturbances.

For more than 30 years, the British ruling class has carried out a war against society. Labour and Conservative alike have sung the praises of the free market, insisting that every aspect of society must be subordinated to it.

As a result Britain, and London especially, was transformed into a playground for the financial oligarchy and a centre for swindling and corruption, while privatization, deregulation and the dismantling of social protections reduced entire areas of the country to industrial wastelands, producing one of the most socially unequal countries in the world.

It was not only the super-rich who benefited from these policies. An entire industry sprang up comprised of a privileged middle class layer within and around the Labour Party and the trade unions, whose specific purpose was to politically legitimize social inequality. This was the content of the various lifestyle and identity politics—based on race and gender—that have been falsely passed off as "progressive" and even left-wing over the last period.

The financial crisis in 2008, caused by the criminal, speculative activities of the super-rich exposed the lies of the ruling elite as to the superiority of the capitalist market. But it caused no change on their part. Not a single banker, speculator or those meant to regulate their activities has been held to account.

Instead, the Labour government looted more than £1 trillion from public

funds and handed it over to major financial institutions. This was part of a calculated decision to utilize the economic crisis to push through a social counter-revolution against the gains and conditions of the working class.

The common line of the Stalinist and ex-left groups is that the riots were entirely without any political cause or impulse. The youth involved had no banners or political demands, they say and so the disturbances were illegitimate. That's how these various groups justify their support for the police crack down.

It is certainly the case that the riots were an eruption of inchoate and elemental social anger, without focus or direction. But why is that the case?

It is little over a year since the British general election in which no single party was able to form a government—such is the alienation from the existing political set-up. While Labour's vote fell, the Tories were unable to benefit. Thousands of young people, however, did vote for the Liberal Democrats because of their avowed opposition to spending cuts, their pledge to abolish tuition fees, opposition to war and so on.

Events very quickly proved that it doesn't matter what the population want. Just as we see in Greece and elsewhere, it was made clear that government policy is dictated solely by the demands of the international markets and financial institutions.

And so the Liberals formed a coalition with the Tories, and proceeded to implement the largest package of austerity measures since the 1930s, tripled tuition fees, abolished financial aid for working class youth to go into higher education and went to war in Libya.

From November through to January this year, tens of thousands of young people turned out in a series of protests against the attack on education. Many believed that the legitimacy of their demands—the right to a decent education—would force parliament to back down. Their hopes were quickly dispelled.

Instead, thousands of police were dispatched to kettle young protestors for hours at a time, beat them and subject them to mounted police charges. Some 400 young people were arrested in the course of these protests, several of whom were subject to punitive prison sentences, while parliament approved government policy.

Throughout this time, the Labour Party defended the government. As for the trade unions, they were nowhere to be seen. They had nothing to say to millions of young people whose futures are being destroyed before their eyes.

What these experiences proved was that, no less than in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere, the British political system is entirely unresponsive to the needs of the vast majority of the population.

With all the official channels for political opposition effectively closed down, it is no wonder that young people erupted.

Consider the significance of the fact that the riots coincided with the further global stock market turmoil at the start of August sparked by the Eurozone crisis and the decision to downgrade the credit rating of the United States.

This decision signaled that the crisis of capitalism had entered a new, and potentially more devastating stage—one in which the austerity measures implemented so far pale into significance.

Yet faced with a looming economic catastrophe, not a single politician is willing or able to propose any serious measure to alleviate the social consequences. Instead, all of the establishment parties pursue policies that exacerbate the crisis, increase national conflicts and lead toward dictatorship and war.

And here we come to the real tragedy facing young people—the absence of any political organization that fights for their interests. Labour is nothing more than a right wing big business party. As for the trade unions, they have played the lead role in isolating the youth.

We are now more than a year into the coalition government. Officially, 2.5 million are unemployed, and one in every five 16 to 24 year olds is

without work, education or training. More than 100,000 jobs have gone in the public sector alone in the last three months. Tens of thousands of workers have had their contracts ripped up and forced onto lower rates of pay.

The trade unions have not lifted a finger against the government's policies. Even now the union leaders speak only of a token "Day of Action". Make no mistake—these are organizations that have nothing to do with the working class. They are hostile to any measures that impinge on the capitalist market, because that would threaten their vast privileges.

The social and political opposition that will and must develop against the capitalist profit system will do so only in a rebellion against these organizations and parties.

The statement calling for this conference draws a parallel with conditions in the late 18th century, explaining that then as now, "In economics, the media and politics it is the financial aristocracy who call the shots. It is just as unwilling to give up its wealth and privileges voluntarily as was the French aristocracy on the eve of revolution in 1789."

We are not the only ones making comparisons with the late 18th century. On the riots, for example, several commentators have pointed to similarities between that period and the situation in Britain today. They noted that then, as now, England acquired the reputation as the country where social anger regularly exploded into rioting. And they drew parallels with the vicious state repression meted out at the time, with the type of measures now being implemented.

The comparison, however, is far more prescient than these commentators can imagine. No one feared and loathed the revolutionary events in Europe in the late 18th century more than the British bourgeoisie.

Its fear, above all, was of revolutionary "contagion". This fear was justified. Large sections of the working class in Britain regarded the revolutionary movements in Europe as part of a common, class struggle. Above all, the methods of repression resorted to by the bourgeoisie at that time were aimed at preventing such a development.

How do things stand today? In the last days it was revealed that Britain is drawing up what is described as "survival plans" in the likely event of a collapse of the euro. According to reports, these contingency plans forecast that, in such an event, the economy in countries like Germany will contract by as much as 25 percent, with "weaker" economies like Greece and Spain contracting by more than 50 percent.

This, one economist said, "would certainly involve a recession on a scale beyond modern experience or comprehension in a Western democracy". Labour's Ed Balls has said it would mean a "massive economic catastrophe" on a scale far surpassing the banking crash in 2008.

That is the significance of the calls across Europe for "strong government"—read dictatorship—and the iron fist policy meted out against working class youth in England.

One final comparison must be made between the late 18th century and today. Then the workers movement was in its infancy, and was later to see an explosive growth. Now we are living at a time of the disintegration and collapse of the old organisations. Everything depends on the building of a new mass socialist movement of the working class.



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