

One year since the UK riots

Robert Stevens
8 August 2012

On August 6, 2011, riots erupted after the police killing of Mark Duggan, an unarmed father of four, in Tottenham, London.

Sparked by yet another brutal police killing, the riots were more fundamentally an elemental protest against devastating poverty and unemployment. They quickly spread across the capital and to other cities around the UK.

One year later, an extraordinary level of state repression continues to be meted out to those accused of involvement. The massive police clampdown has resulted in more than 5,000 arrests nationally, with more than 4,350 in London alone. Ministry of Justice statistics reveal that more than 3,000 people have been charged with an offence and 1,292 have been jailed. A total of over 1,800 years in prison has been handed down to those charged in relation to the riots.

Basic democratic norms were torn up as assembly-line prosecution of alleged rioters, including courts operating 24 hours, was carried out. The average custodial sentence was 16.8 months, more than four times the average term handed down by magistrates' courts for similar offences. One person was jailed for six months for taking bottled water worth £3.50 from a store. Two men received four-year jail sentences merely for Facebook postings supportive of rioting.

One year on, people are still being rounded up, with the Metropolitan Police expecting 600 more arrests in the coming months.

While thousands have been arrested, tried and jailed, not a single police officer has been brought to justice over Duggan's killing, despite the fact that 31 police officers surrounded him as he was executed.

Mass repression was justified in part with statements that London was preparing to host the Olympic Games and that the rioters had to be severely punished to make the streets "safe". It heralded the escalation of repression that has characterised the capital ever since.

The Olympics are now taking place in a city that is under virtual lockdown, enforced by 49,000 uniformed personnel, including 17,000 troops.

The response of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government, the opposition Labour Party and the media throughout has been to treat the riots entirely as a law-and-order question. Any consideration of the social impulse for the unrest was derided as evidence of being soft on crime.

Following the riots, not a single proposal was made for the amelioration of the social conditions that gave rise to the unrest. Instead, social conditions have steadily worsened due to the imposition of billions in austerity cuts amidst deepening recession. Youth unemployment is 12 percent higher this summer than it was a year ago.

The refusal to consider the broader causes of the riots contrasts to the response to the mass rioting that erupted in 1981 in Brixton, London and other cities. Even at that juncture, a Conservative government committed to "rolling back the frontiers of the state" and imposing massive attacks on the working class still felt obliged to acknowledge that such an uprising had a societal impulse. The government of Margaret Thatcher commissioned the Scarman Inquiry, which found that police brutality, especially against young black people, was the primary cause of the riots. This from a government led by a prime minister who famously declared, "There is no such thing as society!"

Today, the heirs of Thatcher respond only by increasing repression while proposing nothing to remedy the social ills afflicting millions. The attacks on the living standards of the working class and the poorest in society being imposed by Prime Minister David Cameron's coalition dwarf anything carried out by Thatcher.

The 2011 riots occurred in the aftermath of the global financial crash of 2008. This meltdown, the outcome of

a systemic breakdown of global capitalism, is being utilised by the ruling elite in Britain and Europe as an opportunity to eliminate everything that remains of welfare state provision and reduce the pay and conditions of working people to levels existing in China, India and Eastern Europe.

Nothing separates Thatcher and Cameron ideologically. However, in the 1980s the ruling elite felt it had to factor in the real possibility of organised opposition to its policies from the working class. Calming the inner cities was a means of clearing the decks for a decisive confrontation with the industrial working class, including the steelworkers and the miners.

A widely hated government was ultimately able to impose its attacks and defeat the most combative sections of the working class due to the role of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy. They abased themselves before the Tories, betrayed every struggle of the working class leading up to the historic defeat suffered by the miners in 1984-85, and finally adopted the Tories' reactionary free market nostrums as their own.

A quarter of a century later, there was not a single instance during or after the 2011 riots in which the Labour Party or trade unions expressed the slightest degree of sympathy for the socially oppressed. Instead, they faithfully lined up behind the law-and-order bandwagon. And the same is true for the myriad figures that made their careers in politics, social services and the media as supposed leaders of the "black community."

There will be further social unrest in the UK. Due to worsening conditions, that is inevitable. But riots are only a symptom of a deep-going social malaise, an outburst of pent-up frustration and anger. They offer no way forward, no means to fight back.

There is no mechanism within the existing political set-up through which broad masses of workers and young people can articulate their deep-going social grievances and fight for a solution in their own interests. What used to be known as the "labour movement" has been destroyed from within.

These ossified pro-business apparatuses are seen as irrelevant or viewed with overt hostility, particularly by the younger generation. Few would now distinguish between Labour, Tory and Liberal politicians. All are

seen as corrupt. Barely anyone under 25 is in a trade union, and the few that are in these organisations are subjected to one rotten betrayal after another.

What is starkly posed before this generation is the building of a new political leadership. The Socialist Equality Party in the UK and our political co-thinkers internationally are dedicated to ending the profit system and replacing it with a socialist society based on the reorganisation of economic life to serve human needs, not corporate profits. It is in this titanic struggle that the future of young people will be forged.

Robert Stevens



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact