Rotherham locked down by police before English Defence League march

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Rotherham in South Yorkshire, England had its town centre placed under police lockdown for up to six hours Saturday to ensure that a march by the racist, anti-Muslim English Defence League (EDL) and a counter march by Unite Against Fascism could proceed peacefully.

The operation cost hundreds of thousands of pounds as 800 extra police, including mounted officers, were drafted in. A police helicopter hovered overhead. Shopkeepers and market traders were told they should close, and police boarded trains and buses. Ten-foot mobile wire mesh frames with plastic backs were used to contain people within the town's All Saints Square. Cameras were mounted on poles to better take photographs of protesters. The police formed cordons all around the town, which shoppers had to pass through.

This is not the first time the EDL has been used as an excuse to mount intimidatory police operations and whip-up anti-Muslim feeling. The EDL has all the hallmarks of a state-run outfit expressly designed for this purpose. In holding the march in Rotherham, the EDL was looking to make political hay of a recent court case in which five local Asian males were convicted of grooming young and underage white females to perform sexual favors.

As economic and social conditions make the unity of workers and youth of all races and religions imperative, the EDL plays the role of spearheading an officially-sanctioned racist campaign against "Islamic extremism". Their right-wing campaign serves to promote Britain's wars throughout the Middle East and the suppression of democratic rights at home.

The march took a familiar pattern. Nothing was confirmed until the last moment, at which point the police began telling businesses, shops and meeting places to close for the day to "avoid disturbances". At the mosques, imams told young men to stay away from the town centre. Only a couple of the usual 40-some taxicabs operated. Buses scheduled to go through town were re-routed. It suits the interests of the police to generate a general air of unease, bordering on panic.

The 400 EDL marchers were mainly brought in from other areas, surrounded by the police. Their main speaker attacked the "political elite" who cover up for crimes carried out by Asians that "we wouldn't get away with".

Trailing half an hour behind them came the Unite Against Fascism counter-march. Set up by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and then endorsed by the Trades Union Congress, it is a useful vehicle for the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy to pose as progressives. Its refusal to undertake any struggle against the racism of the official parties, let alone link opposition to the danger of fascism with a struggle against capitalism, has even earned it the endorsement of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron.

The march featured church figures as well as the SWP, Labour MPs and councillors and various trade union bureaucrats. Jahangir Akhtar, the deputy leader of Rotherham Council, spoke against the "rudeness and corruption" the EDL was "spreading in our communities". He complained pathetically that "nobody had consulted us [the council] about the route the EDL was taking", but had nothing to say about how Labour's own foreign and domestic policies provide succour for nationalists and racists.

Local Labour MPs Denis MacShane and John Healey, along with councillors like Ken Wyatt, have supported every attack made on the working masses both at home and abroad. The SWP also supports British imperialism's interests in the Middle East by

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backing one or other section of the national bourgeoisie within these countries.

While the EDL is used to organise state provocations against the working class, Unite Against Fascism's protests not only serve as a platform for the Labourites and union functionaries to divert attention from their own political crimes. They dragoon anti-racist youth and others into a situation where the police can photograph and identify them for their intelligence files.

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