Bedford riot highlights appalling conditions in UK prisons

John Newham, Robert Stevens
9 November 2016

More than 200 inmates at Bedford prison, southern England, rioted Sunday evening.

Footage from inside the facility posted online revealed chaotic scenes. The BBC reported, “Prisoners on wings A, B and C—gallery-style Victorian landings—were involved in the disturbance.”

According to reports, trouble started when inmates were told, with no notice, that their social time out of their cells was being halved—from one hour to 30 minutes. The partner of one inmate said, “They got let out for showers, to make phone calls and socialise but it got cut short and they weren’t having it. They got angry and it kicked off.”

She disputed media reports that inmates were running amok armed with knives, stating, “My boyfriend also said that there weren’t any knives used and the prison officers ran away when they realised they couldn’t handle the situation.”

The disturbance provoked a massive state clampdown. A specialist “Tornado Team” prison squad, trained to quell riots, assisted by riot police, were sent in to put down the disturbance.

At around 11 p.m., some six hours after the disturbance began and about 30 minutes before prison officers regained control, there were reports of loud bangs/explosions coming from inside the prison. The *Sun* reported that the riot squad “stormed into the Victorian nick [prison] and blasted lags [inmates] with terrifying ‘flashbang’ explosives to restore order after inmates barricaded themselves inside.”

More than a dozen police cars surrounded the prison for hours as the riot was brought to an end. *Sky News* reported that police vans outside were seen “marked as carrying chemicals including ‘irritants,’ ‘flammable liquid’ and ‘compressed gas.’”

There were no injuries to prison staff, but two inmates were taken to hospital. Some 60 inmates have been removed from the prison.

Three inmates were arrested on suspicion of committing offences under the Prison Security Act 1992.

According to a *Daily Mail* report, brutality against prisoners continued after the riot was quelled. The partner of one prisoner who was allegedly attacked said he had no involvement in the riots. She said, “They got him at around 7:30 a.m. on Monday morning after the riot. They didn’t let him take anything, they didn’t even let him brush his teeth or nothing. When they got him in a van they started beating him up. They all had steel toe cap boots on and his arms, legs and head are covered in bruises. It was prison guards and police officers who attacked him.”

The disturbance speaks to the abysmal conditions within the jail. Bedford is a local prison. It holds many young males who are on remand—yet to be tried or convicted—often for petty offences. Anyone found guilty of participating in the riot faces a potential sentence of up to 15 years.

Speaking to the *Daily Mail*, someone outside the prison said, “This riot isn’t about problems between inmates. What’s happening is aimed at the staff because the inmates are fed up with the conditions in the prison. You are talking about C wing which is meant to hold 140 inmates, now holding something like 300. ... Prisoners are locked up for 23 hours a day and just get half an hour to walk around a synthetic football pitch and then it’s back to the cells. ... Weekends are especially bad in the prison because there isn’t the staff on duty. There is no proper food available and you end up with a filled roll and a packet of crisps if you are lucky.”

Conditions in prisons nationally have rapidly

© World Socialist Web Site

deteriorated as a result of austerity cuts since 2008. The daily prison food budget within public sector prisons for 2014–15 was £2.02 per person. The morning after the disturbance was put down, one inmate hung a note outside his cell window reading, “HELP. NO FOOD.”

Bedford prison had the highest suicide rate of any prison in England and Wales in 2011/12, with four inmates taking their lives. At the time of the disturbance, it was housing 495 prisoners instead of its certified normal capacity of 322. The HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that inmates claimed it was easier to get drugs than clothes or bed sheets and that standards had deteriorated to “unacceptable levels.”

Bedford is the second British jail to witness a riot in the last week. On October 30, a Tornado Team was sent into HMP Lewes, in Sussex, southern England. Mike Rolfe, chairman of the Prison Officers Association (POA), said that disturbance took place as a result of "poor management and severe shortage of staff.”

Such conditions are common in prisons nationwide, following cuts of 7,500 prison officers from 2010-14—reducing overall numbers from about 25,000 to 18,000 since 2010.

Britain’s prison population has increased by 40,000 since 1983 to a record of more than 85,000. It is expected to reach 89,600 by June 2020.

Prisoners are housed in a network of decrepit, mainly Victorian prisons. Bedford was built even earlier, in 1801. Pentonville in London opened in 1842. It holds 1,290 prisoners but was designed to hold 906. It was recommended for demolition in 1938. A recent inspection report described it as “the grimmest of the grim.” On Monday, it was reported that two prisoners had escaped from Pentonville, using diamond cutters and mannequins made of bed sheets to fool staff.

Central to the surge in prison numbers is the law-and-order agenda of successive Labour and Conservative governments. England and Wales now have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe, with 147 people per 100,000 of the population behind bars. There has been a sharp rise in the number of prisoners sentenced to immediate custody (40,000 more in 2016, compared to 1993). The average prison sentence is now 16.2 months—more than three months longer than a decade ago.

Many of those are in prison for “crimes” of poverty, with prisoners overwhelmingly drawn from the most impoverished and oppressed layers. A huge part of the prison population at any one time is on remand, many charged with minor offences. The Prison Reform Trust summer 2016 briefing notes, “Three-fifths (60%) of people entering prison on remand awaiting trial are accused of non-violent offences. 17% were for theft offences, and 10% for drug offences. ... People on remand currently make up 12% of the total prison population—10,066 people.”

Around a quarter of the prison population have been in care as a child. At least a third have a mental or physical disability, and half have the literacy levels of an 11-year-old.

A report by the Howard League for Penal Reform, “Prison statistics reveal a bloodbath of assaults, suicide and self-injury,” cited Ministry of Justice statistics showing that the death rate in prisons in England and Wales rose to almost one a day—a record high of 324 in the 12 months to the end of September 2016. They included 107 prisoners who took their own lives as the suicide rate rose by 13 percent. The number has almost doubled since 2011-12, when 57 people died by suicide in prison.

A right-wing law-and-order campaign is being whipped up, disregarding the impact of a brutal and overcrowded incarceration system. A Prison Service spokesman said of Bedford, “An investigation into this incident will take place. We are absolutely clear that prisoners who behave in this way will be punished and could spend significantly longer behind bars."

Just prior to the Bedford disturbance, Conservative Justice Secretary Liz Truss announced a White Paper detailing a £1.3 billion investment in new prisons over the next five years. The Conservative government’s proposals are aimed at the eventual privatisation of the prison service, including expanding the provision of cheap prison labour. Jails occupying valuable inner city land are to be sold to property developers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site