UK: Inmates riot at Birmingham prison as conditions deteriorate

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21 December 2016

The third riot in two months, and the fourth major disturbance at a UK prison, took place at HM Prison Birmingham Friday. The riot, the largest since that at HM Prison Manchester (then known as Strangeways) in 1990, involved 600 inmates who took over four wings.

During the riot at the Category B 1,450 capacity Victorian-era prison, built in 1849, millions of pounds of damage was caused. One inmate was hurt and went to hospital with a fractured jaw and broken eye socket.

To quell the disturbance, G4S, the private firm who run the prison, sent in two initial Tornado riot control squads. Later the Prison Service's "gold command" sent in an additional 11 Tornado units. It took the riot squads, comprising an eventual 160 officers, over 12 hours until the prison was taken back under control late in the evening.

According to the account of Conservative government Justice Secretary Liz Truss, given to MPs on Monday, the riot began after six prisoners in N wing climbed on to safety netting on Friday at 9:15 a.m. Truss said, "When staff intervened, one of them had their keys snatched. At that point, staff [who are trained to leave and go to a safe place when they lose possession of keys] withdrew for their own safety. Prisoners then gained control of the wing and subsequently of P wing."

According to prison affairs academic, Alex Cavendish, an "inside informant" told him the trouble started with lights being broken and inmates taking control of fire hoses. "The officers were then, as they are instructed to do, trying to get as many prisoners locked in their cells as possible to contain it, "said Cavendish, adding, "While one of the officers was putting a prisoner in the cell he was threatened with what appeared to be a used syringe."

Truss confirmed that after the riot, 380 prisoners were moved out of Birmingham to other prisons. This caused problems in Britain's already severely overcrowded prison system. At HM Prison Hull on Sunday, inmates refused to return to their cells after 15 inmates arrived from Birmingham. In an indication of the incendiary state of other UK prisons, staff at Hull were reportedly assaulted and CCTV cameras were torched. The Prison Officers Association (POA) reported that inmates at HMP Hull were put under lockdown, with only a few allowed out of cells at a time.

As with last month's riot of more than 200 inmates at Bedford prison, it quickly emerged that at the centre of the Birmingham events were the generally intolerable conditions under which inmates are confined. One prisoner who contacted the *Birmingham Mail*—using a mobile phone he obtained—explained how prisoners no longer have access to basic facilities. He stated, "They cancel gym all the time, the showers are cold, the food is crap, the heating is never on and we never get our mail on time."

The issue of access to the gym is a major grievance nationally, as prisoners are locked in their cells for longer periods due to the chronic lack of staff to supervise them elsewhere.

Another prisoner explained, "We are entitled to half an hour of exercise every day and we are just not getting it. I was on N wing before and we did not get the proper levels of exercise for six weeks. People are going crazy because of it. They are breaching our human rights and the government needs to do something about it, they need to sort it out. It's a dangerous place at the moment. People are walking around with knives and G4S have no control."

Another prisoner said, "I used to be on one of the wings and there has been plenty of occasions where just a couple of guards have been in charge of 160

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prisoners. There are all sorts of problems in here. Two people have passed away in the last couple of weeks after taking black mamba"—a reference to one of the relatively new psychoactive drugs that, along with "spice," is now widely available in UK prisons.

An independent monitoring board report covering the period from July 1, 2015 to June 30 this year warned ministers that serious incidents of violence at Birmingham prison had increased to the point where safety "cannot be guaranteed." Assaults on staff at Birmingham rose 84 percent to a record high of 164 incidents last year, according to Ministry of Justice figures.

There have been several other warnings about prison safety, as statistics reveal levels of violence in jails in England and Wales are soaring. Assaults on staff are up by 43 percent nationwide in the year to June.

The level of suicides in prisons in England and Wales is at a record high. According to the Howard League for Penal Reform, 102 people have committed suicide already in 2016. This is up significantly from 58 people in 2011 and 89 in 2015.

A new report by the organisation "Preventing Prison Suicide" notes, "The rise in the number of prison suicides has coincided with cuts to staffing and budgets and a rise in the number of people in prison, resulting in overcrowding. Violence has increased and safety has deteriorated."

It adds, "The prison suicide rate, at 120 deaths per 100,000 people, is about 10 times higher than the rate in the general population."

The Prison Service budget has been slashed by £900 million since 2010, with a 30 percent cut in prison officer numbers (down by 7,000).

The crisis can only worsen as the entire prison network, following the probation service, is hived off for privatisation. The UK already has the most privatised criminal justice system in Europe. As of 2015, 14 prisons (holding 17 percent of the prison population) in England and Wales were run by the private sector. This is an even higher proportion of private prisons than in the United States.

Following the 25-day Strangeways protests, in which two people died and hundreds were injured, the then Tory government was forced to introduce a number of reforms to the UK's prisons, including ending the barbaric practice of "slopping out"—the manual emptying of human waste when prison cells are unlocked in the morning. Lord Justice Woolf made over 200 recommendations, included the appointment of a prisons ombudsman and the introduction of telephones on landings so inmates could keep in closer touch with their families.

Twenty-six years later the situation facing inmates is, if anything, worse than what led to the Strangeways protest. Last year, the Prison Reform Trust issued a report on HM Prison Manchester and found that nearly half of the prisoners are still "doubled up"—two men being held in cells designed for only one inmate. Nationally, two-thirds of all prisons are overcrowded.

According to the POA, in 1990 there were 40,000 prisoners in England and Wales and 23,000 prison staff. This year there are 86,000 prisoners and 13,000 staff. In 2016 alone, there were 500 fewer frontline prison staff. Birmingham prison has 500 staff in total, but such are the conditions that 22 prison officers, whose starting wages are just £20,300 a year, left between September and November.

In contrast to the previous response of introducing prison reforms, however limited, the ruling elite's only reaction today is further repressive "law and order" measures and the continuation of social policies that serve to increase the prison population. Truss told MPs, "[W]e are ensuring that there is a full investigation at HMP Birmingham. There is a full police investigation and the perpetrators of the incident will feel the full force of the law."

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