More disturbances in UK prisons as conditions worsen

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"In short, warehousing has largely replaced rehabilitation. It is small wonder that prison riots and disturbances are no longer a rarity; prisons are dangerous places."

This was said earlier this month of the prison system in the UK by former Supreme Court Justice Lord Brown of Eaton-under-Heywood. It is an apt description.

Brown spoke after yet another disturbance broke out on September 3 at the category B and C prison, HMP Birmingham, after inmates refused to return to their cells late in the afternoon.

This was the spark for a standoff between inmates and officers, in which a small number of prisoners took over a wing. A specialist police attachment, known as Tornado squads, was called in to quell the riot which lasted for more than six hours.

The disturbance took place at what was previously known as the Wilson Green Prison, run by the private security firm G4S since 2011. It was stoked by the introduction of a smoking ban throughout the prison system in England and Wales. Inmates were heard chanting "We want Burn, We want Burn [tobacco]."

Such events are a regular occurrence, given the fact that prisons are social powder kegs due to the hellish conditions prisoners are held in.

The riot took place just one week before the start of a trial of seven inmates for prison mutiny at the same prison on December 16, last year. This was the largest since the riot in 1990 at HMP Manchester, then known as Strangeways. It involved 600 inmates who took over four wings. During the riot millions of pounds of damage was caused.

Only two months prior, inmates at HMP Lewes rioted for six hours against conditions that one refugee inmate described as "worse than Syria."

Last November over 200 prisoners took over parts of HMP Bedford.

At the end of 2016, on December 22, around 60 inmates at HMP Swaleside in Kent took control of parts of a wing.

On July 23, 2017, Tornado squads were called in to deal with disturbances at HMP Hewell near Redditch in Worcestershire.

This was followed, at the end of July and beginning of August, by riots at Mount Prison in Bovingdon village near Hemel Hempstead. Over two days of rioting, prisoners took over a wing housing more than 200 inmates.

This list covers only the latest and larger prison disturbances in England and Wales. Smaller ones hardly make the news.

Last year evidence submitted to MPs by prison officers revealed that riot squads had been called to prisons 30 to 40 times a month—between March and November 2016—to deal with serious disorder including rooftop protests, hostage-taking and incidents of "concerted indiscipline."

Prisons have become the breeding ground of substance abuse, violence—among both guards and the prisoners—mental illness, suicide and squalor.

The Annual Report 2016–17 by Peter Clarke, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, found a drastic decline of conditions within the prison system. It described "facilities" as "filthy and dilapidated," noting that prisons are vermin infested, overcrowded and violent.

A staggering increase in all types of violence was recorded. In the months to December 2016, there was a 27 percent increase in assaults, amounting to 26,000, with assaults on staff up by 38 percent, to 6,844. In the same period, 113 prisoners took their own lives

between April 2016 and March 2017—a more than doubling of self-inflicted deaths since 2013.

Mental illness is becoming the norm. A recent report published by the National Audit Office, "Mental health in prison," states, "Rates of self-inflicted deaths and self-harm have risen significantly in the last five years, suggesting that mental health and well-being in prison have declined."

It adds, "The number of self-harm incidents rose by 73% between 2012 and 2016. In 2016 there were 40,161 incidents of self-harm in prisons, the equivalent of almost one incident for every two prisoners, although some prisoners will self-harm multiple times.

"There are no reliable data on the prevalence of mental illness in prisons. The most commonly used estimate is that 90% of the prison population are mentally unwell, but this figure dates from 1998 and uses a broader definition of mental illness than many clinicians would recognise."

These hellish conditions are compounded by overcrowding, which saw a surge of new inmates in England and Wales and a decline in staffing levels of prison officers—which are far too low to accommodate the most basic needs of prisoners—including exercise, training, education, or even access to basic facilities.

The chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Frances Crook, explained, "Prisons are out of control. A prisoner dies by suicide every three days. Children are locked up with nothing to do for 23 hours a day.

"Record levels of violence mean that men are too scared to leave their cells. Women are injuring themselves more and more. Staff fear for their lives. Conditions are filthy. Enough is enough."

The former director-general of the Prison and Probation Service, Phil Wheatley, said in a *Guardian* interview that prisoner numbers had risen by 1,200 since May alone. He noted that the current population of 86,413 is 1,900 higher than the official 2016 projection of prison numbers for this summer—which anticipated jail numbers would fall to 83,700 by next June.

Year on year reports by successive Chief Inspectors of Prisons for England and Wales report a worsening of conditions. There are countless warnings by prison campaigners and civil rights groups.

Scores of documentaries with undercover film footage have been aired, yet the crisis deepens continuously due to austerity measures by successive Labour and Conservative governments, starving not only the prison system of funds but destroying the living conditions of the working class at large.

One of the latest documentaries by whistle blowers filming their experiences from the inside was aired by the BBC on September 5. *Panorama* showed footage secretly filmed by a young prison officer. Straight out of school and needing a job, he applied for the vacancy as a Detainee Custody Officer at the Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, situated next to Gatwick airport.

Immigration Removal Centres are part of the prison system. The difference is that they do not hold convicted criminals serving their sentence, but foreign nationals waiting to be deported from Britain.

Brook House holds 500 males deemed to be illegal immigrants. Over half are seeking asylum or are deemed to have overstayed their visa. They are meant to stay for a short period, but are there for months or even years. If anything, the situation for those detained at Brook House is more severe than for "normal" prisoners as they are not detained for committing a criminal offence.

People that have come to Britain to escape the horrors of war zones or a life in poverty are left helpless in the face of the brutality they face. The programme graphically showed how they are terrorised with violent and brutal bullying by prison staff and other inmates. Prison officers taunt inmates with racist language and use physical force to deal with prisoners in mental distress.