Ten years after the London riots: More cuts and state repression

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10 August 2021

Ten years ago, on August 6, riots erupted in London and other major English cities following the police murder of the unarmed father of four Mark Duggan.

The riots blew the lid off a society wracked by poverty and inequality and the collapse of any concern for democracy in the ruling class. A decade later, both of Britain's main parties are led by politicians who cut their teeth in the mass repression of working-class youth which followed.

The 2011 riots took place less than a year after Conservative chancellor George Osborne announced billions in spending cuts to help repay the debt taken on by the government bailing out the banks after the 2008-9 financial crash. This crash followed an orgy of profit-making and the looting of public resources through privatisations. In the 30 years before, the richest one percent had more than doubled their share of national income.

Research carried out soon after the events showed that economic deprivation, anger at police brutality and discrimination, and hostility to social inequality were the main drivers of the riots. Investigations since have confirmed these findings.

A January 2019 report, "Re-reading the 2011 English riots", explains, "Deprivation was the strongest predictor of whether a riot occurred in a London borough", "The boroughs with more 'stop and search' in the two-and-a-half years beforehand were those more likely to see rioting in August 2011" and "Many people saw themselves in opposition to a societal system they perceived as unjust and illegitimate".

The authors write, "Participants referred to cuts to youth funding, or increasing poverty, or to other economic disadvantages affecting young people, their community or reference group. Many linked particular disadvantages to their long-standing opposition to the government or the social system more generally."

Faced with this outpouring of anger, the ruling class bared its teeth. In a statement published August 11, 2011, " Oppose state repression of British youth ", the Socialist Equality Party explained:

"There is more than a whiff of fascism in the repeated appeals to 'property owners' and 'respectable citizens' to 'take back the streets' from those described as 'feral rats'…

"The re-called parliament is set to discuss stripping all unemployed people involved in the riots of their welfare entitlements, while the riots are being used to test out domestic counterinsurgency measures in preparation for the far broader struggles of the working class that are foreshadowed by these events."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, then Mayor of London, lamented afterwards "you have got to ask yourself: could we have gone in harder?" He demanded, "we need to think about ways of imposing discipline," suggesting a national citizen service. He purchased three water cannons for the Metropolitan Police.

Around 4,000 people were arrested during and after the riots and more than 2,000 convicted, rushed through kangaroo courts which sat through the night to rubber stamp punishing sentences.

A 2015 article in the *British Journal of Criminology*, "The 2011 English 'Riots': Prosecutorial Zeal and Judicial Abandon," explains how the Crown Prosecution Service lowered the threshold for pressing charges and encouraged convictions for burglary, which carries a higher maximum sentence, rather than theft. It pushed for cases to be heard in the Crown Court rather than magistrates' courts, also making longer sentences available.

The percentage of those given an immediate custodial sentence for a riot-related offence by a magistrate's court was three times higher than the rate for similar offences in 2010. It was more than two times higher in Crown Court. The overall average length of sentence was 17.1 months, four-and-a-half times higher than the average for similar offences in the year before.

Writing on " One year since the UK riots ", the World Socialist Web Site commented, "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".

The WSWS compared this response to the Thatcher government's organisation of the Scarman Inquiry after the 1981 riots:

"[I]n the 1980s the ruling elite felt it had to factor in the real possibility of organised opposition to its policies from the

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working class." But in the years that followed, this opposition was systematically demobilised by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy who "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".

Another decade on, the social counterrevolution has deepened, and Labour and the Tories stand even further to the right.

The assault on the working class, especially working-class youth, has been unrelenting. Roughly 700,000 more children were living in poverty in March 2020 than in 2011. In that year, there were an estimated 500,000 "forgotten families" in serious financial need but who did not meet the threshold for government support due to spending cuts. The latest data available estimates 829,000 "invisible" children in the same situation and notes another 761,000 receiving an "unclear" level of support. The pandemic will have drastically worsened these figures. Since 2011, the national budget for youth services has been cut by 73 percent.

The slashing of social spending has been matched by a turn to authoritarian forms of rule, epitomised by the government's snarling response to the George Floyd protestors, denounced as "thugs", and plans for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. This draconian legislation gives the state the power to ban **"** disruptive **"** protests, fine their participants up to £2,500 and send organisers to prison for up to a year. "Causing a public nuisance" or damaging a memorial is made punishable by up to ten years in prison.

Two weeks ago, Johnson announced his government's crime plan, including putting anti-social behaviour offenders in "fluorescent-jacketed chain gangs" and easing restrictions on police stop-and-search powers.

The Labour Party is just as filthy. After five years in which Jeremy Corbyn blocked any fightback against the Tory government's austerity, the party is in the hands of Sir Keir Starmer, the former head of the Crown Prosecution Service who oversaw the crackdown on the riots.

As Director of Public Prosecutions, Starmer went as far as visiting Highbury Magistrates Court in North London at four in the morning to boost prosecutors' morale. He later praised the railroading of young people into prison, saying "For me it was the speed that I think may have played some small part in bringing the situation back under control".

Labour's ongoing lurch to the right has highlighted the reactionary, anti-working-class character of identity politics, which insists that the fundamental division in society is race as a means of advancing a tiny, affluent layer of ethnic minorities and disguising class oppression. Its advocates' claimed concern for racial inequality was quickly replaced during the riots with law-and-order denunciations of poor workers and youth, black and white alike.

The WSWS commented: "the black and Asian Labour MPs and assorted 'community leaders' who have utilized racial politics to bolster their careers and bank balances are the most vociferous in insisting that poverty is 'no excuse' for rioting and that the police must respond with force."

The same response was given this March to confrontations in Bristol between protestors against the Police Bill and police armed with riot gear, dogs and horses. The Labour Mayor of the city, Marvin Rees, denounced the protest as "lawlessness" and the result of "a group of people running around the country looking for any opportunity to enter into physical conflict with the police".

Rees followed his right-wing rant with a racialist appeal: "I am from a communities who are disproportionately likely to be on the receiving end of the criminal justice system and receive unfair treatment. What they [protesters of the Police Bill] have done has done nothing to make me, and people like me, safer."

Among the most prominent proponents of racial politics in 2011 was Labour MP and now Shadow Secretary of State for Justice, David Lammy. He wrote in the *Guardian* last week that in 2011 "peaceful protests were hijacked by violent criminals" and described the "shops, homes and businesses… senselessly turned into ashes by the flames of the mob."

Like the handful of media and Labour "lefts" who have commented on this anniversary, Lammy adds a few concerned observations—that the "nation's divides" are widening, social alienation is rising and recommendations for improvement are ignored. All of which is framed around the standard appeal that "lessons must be learned".

But the ruling class has already learned its lesson. Incapable of carrying out any policy other than the glutting of the rich, and confronted with mass social opposition, they are set on imposing brutal class war against the working class through the most right-wing government and "opposition" in British history.

The pandemic policy of social murder shows how far this process has gone. The decisive political question posed by the riots is raised even more urgently: the building of a new, revolutionary leadership of the working class which fights for the socialist transformation of society to serve human needs not private profits.

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