

UK: Oppose communalism in Leicester, fight for workers' unity

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Fighting between Hindu and Muslim youth in Leicester demands a response by workers uniting against all attempts to divide them along communalist lines.

Leicester, with a population of 330,000, has been held up as a beacon of “successful integration” due to its highly ethnically diverse population, particularly due to post-war migration to the area from south Asia.

Violence was sparked by a deliberate provocation by right-wing, Hindu chauvinist forces. On September 17, around 300 young men, masked and some wearing balaclavas, held an unauthorised march through Green Lane Road in Spinney Hills, a predominantly Muslim area, chanting “Jai Shri Ram” (“Victory to Lord Rama”). The slogan has been used by Hindu supremacists in key states of India to inflame communalist tensions.

Due to the queen’s funeral that day, local police were thin on the ground. A number of officers were injured and additional police drafted in from other areas to deal with the backlash. In the days that followed, more clashes ensued as Muslim youth gathered in retaliation in Belgrave in the city’s north west. Bottles were thrown and a flag torn down from the Shivalaya Hindu Temple on Belgrave Road.

Severe state repression has followed.

As of October 5, 55 people have been arrested in relation to the unrest. Police launched an investigation with a team of 50 officers reviewing 6,000 hours of body camera footage, CCTV and social media videos, and investigating over 158 incidents. The police stated that a “zero tolerance” policy will be implemented, meaning mass arrests will be made and the local population placed under continuous surveillance. Conservative Home Secretary Suella Braverman urged police to use all the powers at their disposal.

The courts fast tracked the convictions of some of those arrested. Amos Noromh, a 20-year-old man arrested September 18 on suspicion of possession of an offensive weapon, appeared at Leicester Magistrates’ Court the very next day and was sentenced to ten months in prison. The day after, Leicester police were authorised to use dispersal powers and stop-and-search and began building an increased police presence in over a third of the Leicester area.

On the same day, a reported 200 masked mainly Muslim youth travelled to Smethwick in Birmingham, the UK’s second largest city. They were protesting an advertised meeting of a Hindu nationalist speaker, Sadhvi Ritambhara, (which had been cancelled) being held at the Hindu temple and were met by police

in riot gear.

The mayor of Leicester, Sir Peter Soulsby, called for an independent review into the “social unrest”, citing motivation by “extreme ideologies” and “outside forces”.

The Asia Cup cricket match between India and Pakistan, held in Dubai on August 28, was cited as the source of clashes. But there have traditionally been tensions around such games. What is different today is the deliberate attempt by supporters of India’s ruling far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to whip up communalism at home and internationally.

On December 12, 2019, BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi rammed the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) through parliament. The CAA made religion a criterion in determining citizenship for the first time in the history of independent India. The WSWWS noted that this move, which sparked major protests throughout the country, was an “important step toward realizing the avowed central aim of the BJP and its ideological mentor, the shadowy, fascistic RSS—to transform India into a Hindu *rashtra*, or state, in which the Muslim minority is ‘tolerated,’ but only in so far as it accepts Hindu supremacy.

“Muslim students and youth have been in the forefront of the anti-CAA protests. But the protests have cut across religious-sectarian, ethnic and caste divides, and engulfed all parts of India.”

On October 7, the *Leicester Mercury* reported, “Experts told Thomson Reuters Foundation that most of the incendiary tweets, rumours and lies originated from India. The top hashtags used by accounts from India said #HindusUnderattackinUK and #HindusUnderAttack, a BBC investigation showed.”

Following the cricket match supporters draped in Indian flags walked through Belgrave chanting “Pakistan Murdabad” (meaning “death to Pakistan”). The actions of the Hindu chauvinists were bound to provoke a backlash in Leicester. Most of the city’s Muslim population hails from India, and their ancestors no doubt suffered Islamophobic persecution as Muslims are suffering persecution today from Modi’s filthy government.

The threat exists of the spread of such violence to other areas that do not have the particular demographic make-up of Leicester. There is significant evidence that reactionary forces were trying to create conditions for this spread, with Hindu and Muslim chauvinists bussing people into Leicester. According to the *Guardian*, almost all of those arrested in connection with the violence came from *outside* Leicestershire.

There can be no solution to the violence and provocations of

Hindu nationalists based on tit for tat reprisals. Continuing and escalating communal conflict in Leicester would be disastrous not just for Britain's Asian population but for the entire working class.

These events have been a gift to far-right forces. The events in Leicester were followed and commented on excessively by *GB News*, *Breitbart* and other right-wing media, providing grist for their mill of an anti-immigration agenda and used to demand a further law-and-order clampdown. Nigel Farage railed on *GB News* against "diversity and multi-culturalism". When the host responded that "the police seem to have lost control as well", Farage replied, "The police don't exist when it comes to the ethnic minorities".

In a September 21 video, the fascist Tommy Robinson egged on the Hindu chauvinists, declaring that "We have all grown up with Hindus. We know who they are, we know how peaceful they are... It's the Pakistani Muslims coming in from Birmingham, it's the Pakistani Muslims travelling from different cities to attack Indian Hindus, to terrorise them in their homes and to target their women."

The *Times* reported that as the violence flared, Robinson intervened on "Gettr, a social media platform frequented by many on the far right" to say that "he had contacted members of the Hindu community, offering support and protection from men across the UK." He was "looking to rally football fans to travel to Leicester to protect Hindus from an 'onslaught from Pakistani Muslims'".

To oppose such policies workers must unite on a class basis, and one based on an historical understanding of the real source of religious and communal divisions.

Amid all the wailing in the media, partition of India by British imperialism in 1947, based on ethno-communal state borders, into a Hindu-majority Indian state and the Islamic state of Pakistan. The communal violence that followed led to anywhere up to 2 million casualties.

There are no end of issues over which right-wing and far-right forces can whip up communalist violence, and not only in Leicester. The Muslim population in Leicester are chiefly from India, with a smaller group that originates from Pakistan. The most-disputed region of India is Kashmir, which is claimed by Pakistan and has a majority Muslim population. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over the territory. It is estimated that of the million-plus Pakistanis in the UK, around 750,000 are from Kashmir.

The flare-up of conflict in Britain has only served to inflame the heightened tensions between India and Pakistan. A *Financial Times* piece published last week, headlined "Leicester's communal violence reverberates across continents", noted the disturbances were "sending shockwaves all the way to India". This has the most dangerous implications. Pakistan is a country where the military has been in charge for half of its 75-year existence, and is, like India, a nuclear armed power.

According to the media, Leicester's main problem is religious conflict and not the appalling levels of deprivation and poverty suffered by many of its residents. The city has historically been associated with the production of textiles, clothing and shoes, and Leicester's garment district is home to more than 1,000 factories

employing as many as 10,000 workers. The sweatshop conditions of these workers, working in ramshackle workshops and paid around £4 an hour, was exposed in July 2020 as a surge of cases of COVID-19 spread among production and distribution staff.

In June 2020, Leicester became the first city in the UK to be placed under a "local lockdown" after the Conservative government began recklessly lifting lockdown restrictions the previous month. Ending restrictions led to a flood of new COVID cases in the city and other urban areas of Britain.

Many of Britain's inner-cities are led by political figures who have built careers and sometimes personal fortunes on appealing to one or another ethnic/religious group. This holds true of both the Conservatives and the Labour Party, with local councillors selected for seats according to religion and representing the Hindu or Muslim "communities".

The response of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to the events in Leicester was to come to the defence of the Hindu nationalists with the statement, "Hindophobia has absolutely no place in our society," while making no mention of Hindu attacks on Muslims.

Workers, especially the younger generation, should ask themselves whether they are prepared to accept lining up behind various communal politicians, or do they want to oppose this and fight for class unity?

As proven with Leicester, whole areas of Britain are tinderboxes ripe for the exploitation by right-wing forces operating on the most reactionary agenda. These forces can only be successfully opposed by workers asserting their own class interests.

In its December 19, 2019, perspective, "The fight against communal reaction in India is the fight for socialism", the WSWS advanced a strategy for the working class, writing, "The struggle against communal reaction must be animated by a socialist internationalist perspective. The fight to unite India's workers and toilers across all sectarian and caste lines goes hand in hand with the fight to unite their struggles with those of workers around the world."

The greatest fear of those advancing communal politics—in the UK, as in India—is of a united working class advancing its own independent interests that cuts across all carefully fostered sectarian divisions. Under conditions in which millions of workers are in struggle for their jobs, pay and conditions, workers of every ethnicity and religious background must seek the closest unity in a fight against the common capitalist enemy, whatever religion they might profess.



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