



The political situation in Britain after the August uprising

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Resolution from Workers Power on the political situation after the riots

The uprising and its causes

On the evening of Saturday 7 August, an uprising against the police started in Tottenham. The immediate cause was an unprovoked police attack on a 16 year old girl, who was demanding answers from the police in front of a peaceful demonstration. The protest was about the police shooting dead Mark Duggan on Thursday 4 August. By this stage, it had become clear that the initial police (and IPCC) report that Duggan had exchanged fire with the police was false. Once news of this second act of police brutality and racism spread, a full-scale riot erupted.

On the same evening, the uprising spread to Enfield and a few other places in north east London. On Sunday, Brixton and several other inner city areas also saw fighting against the police and looting. Monday, the height of the uprising, saw the action spread to Hackney, Peckham, Lewisham, Clapham, Croydon, Camden, Oxford Street, and to Birmingham, Liverpool and Bristol. By Tuesday, while most of London was quiet, Manchester, Salford and Nottingham were aflame. In all of these areas (and others where smaller scale uprisings took place) police murder (937 deaths in police custody since 1990) and racism (young black men 26 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white male youths) are common facts of life.

In all cases, there were a mix of people, classes and motivations for those who came onto the streets. Like revolutions, so-called 'riots' bring people from all the lower classes onto the streets, but this does not mean it is impossible to discern the dominant groups and the main class interests driving the action. It was in the main an uprising of working class youth against police brutality, racism and harassment, and the underlying conditions facing the working class today: mass unemployment (20 percent for youth, 50 percent for black youth), low wages and inflation, the reduction in benefits, including EMA, the raising of tuition fees, poor housing and a chronic housing shortage, and cuts in public services, especially in youth services and education (schools, colleges, universities).

Despite the police, Tories and media focus on black (African-Caribbean) youth, it was a general youth uprising in the inner cities involving white, black and Asian youth, male and female. Many disturbances took place in areas with a high density of black people but this simply reflects the fact that black people are concentrated in deprived areas. Nevertheless there has been an upsurge in racist commentary from the more coded messages about black parenting to the rightwing historian David Starkey who mixed his fear and loathing for poor youth with outright racism when citing Enoch Powell and adding that white youths have 'become black'. The fascist EDL came out onto the streets to 'defend' (white) England in Eltham and mobilised a large reactionary 'whiteshirt' mob in Enfield under the banner of the Enfield Defence League.

Some looting was organised by criminal gangs, which usually operate within the boundaries of estates, postcodes or boroughs. Some of them collaborated. This may explain some of the reactionary behaviour on the streets, attacks on firefighters and a hospital, muggings, burning down of independent stores and workers' homes. However, such opportunistic criminal behaviour would not have been possible without the uprising. Clearly many cheered on the smashing of hated symbols of capitalism - chain stores, pawnbrokers/loan sharks and banks - and many joined in the

looting when the opportunity arose. Although some small shops were smashed up the main targets were supermarkets and electronics retailers. In the heat of the moment, it is understandable why workers and youth living in desperate conditions and thrown onto the scrapheap by this government were pulled in behind the looters and gangs. Now our communities need to stand together and unite. This means opposing the government and magistrates' draconian politically motivated charges and sentencing. But we are not indifferent to the lumpen gangs which prey on working class communities ? we support the working class taking action itself to stop muggings and robberies of ordinary people. But if these self-defence teams come exclusively from one ethnic group then serious conflict between different communities becomes a severe danger. That is why working class unity across the divides is critical.

Another key factor for understanding these events is the decline in size and militancy of the labour movement and the deep crisis of working class leadership. The contraction of the Labour Party's membership, its long-term witch-hunt of the left and shift to the right (barely a handful of Labour councillors voted against local cuts), its record in government of war, privatisation and growing inequality and the closing down a generation ago of its youth wing have left the estates without a working class party. The unions' failure to renew their ranks and offer membership and fighting organisations to the unemployed or temporary, unskilled workers has likewise left young workers abandoned. We call on the labour movement leaders to organise a mass unionisation drive and for the formation of a mass socialist youth organisation.

Many rioters on the streets said they were against the government, against the cuts, against the police and against the rich. But the absence of clear goals and of any strategy, their sometimes indiscriminate choice of targets, their failure to express demands, the focus on getting consumer goods and the susceptibility of the riots to involvement by criminal lumpen gangs: all are signs of decades of almost non-existent organisation of the working class youth, of mounting inequality and alienation that the left has failed to channel into a revolutionary movement.

But it would be helpless pessimism to point to the changing shape of the working class, the numerical decline of the unions and the alienation of the youth without observing the other side of the picture, the side that points the way forward out of the crisis. Just as the Tory offensive on pay, jobs and services can rally powerful workers' resistance in which the strength of our unions can be rebuilt, so the uprising revealed the revolutionary spirit of the youth, their fearlessness and energy, their hatred of the police and contempt for the rich, which can be channelled and directed against the state and the capitalists if it is organised.

As the working class changes over time so every generation is faced with the task of transforming its unions and the political organisations to meet the challenge. The uprising forcefully reminds us that the unemployed have no representation, that young workers are seriously under-represented in the unions, and that with 50 percent unemployment and systematic racism, it is African-Caribbean youth who face the most sustained and chronic lack of a political voice.

The state's response

The first thing to say about the state's response, led by the Tory politicians and police chiefs, is that it is not knee-jerk, but a carefully executed implementation of already existing contingency plans for mass rioting and civil unrest. Certainly, though, the Tories and ruling class were shocked by the depth and scale of the uprising, which their ideological assumptions about Britain's 'gradualist' political culture did not anticipate. They know that they will meet resistance to the austerity, which may now get even tougher due to the economic stagnation and global crisis. They got a taste of this during the student uprising and 30 June coordinated strike.

The measures (rubber bullets, tear gas, curfew powers) announced in the wake of the riots had long been discussed; but, in their majority, the Tories did not expect to see unrest on a scale that would require this level of repression. That's why the riots represent a dramatic 'game changer' in the political situation ? with the Tories seeking to ride the backlash against the rioters to push the overall political climate to the right.

The immediate message was that the riots were an outbreak of 'pure criminality' and that almost any discussion of their causes constituted excusing them. The tabloids launched a filthy tide of dehumanising hate-speak ? centred on the

theme of 'packs of feral children?', 'plagues of locusts?', and suchlike. The second line of attack was that the riots represented a breakdown of family discipline and respect for all authority. Other targets were, absent fathers/single mothers, gangs, rap music, hoodies, liberal teaching and parenting practices. Favourite Tory themes were tacked on: a rights without duties? culture, and even the European Human Rights Act was blamed for preventing parents from 'physically disciplining?' (i.e. beating) their children. The Churches joined in with their claim that it was the abandonment of faith based moral values, churchgoing etc, that was to blame (how they account for the huge numbers of riots in the 'age of faith?' they did not venture to say)

In short there was an A to Z of hatred aimed at young people, poor people, and specifically black people. This was an attempt to drown out any attempts to raise the effects of four long years of capitalist depression, of three years of Labour and Tory-Liberal cuts, of structural unemployment differentially hitting the black and migrant communities, and the never-eradicated racism of the police ? reflected in the de facto reintroduction of SUS Laws and the huge racist bias of stop and search.

Only a few figures invited onto the broadcast media dared to stand up for the youth involved in the riots- most courageously Darcus Howe who rightly pointed to the police shooting of Mark Duggan and the consequences of daily harassment. 'That was the catalyst, and residing in the catalyst is the cause, and the cause was the constant stopping and searching of young blacks.' He also correctly insisted 'I don't call it rioting; I call it an insurrection of the masses of the people. It is happening in Syria, it is happening in Clapham, it's happening in Liverpool, it's happening in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and that is the nature of the historical moment?..'

The police have been able to make inroads into the communities in the most deprived areas with their campaign on knife and gun crime, on gangs and so on amongst youth. These are perceived as real and serious problems in those communities. The aim of the police and the government is to avoid recognising it as caused by capitalism; by endemic poverty, joblessness, and social neglect, as well as by police/state/employer racism. Likewise they wish to obscure the fact that the drug problem and its linkage to gangs is a product of joblessness and 'the war on drugs?' ? driving some drugs (not alcohol, not tobacco) into illegality. Since the ending of the brief liberal line on cannabis police have another reason to stop and search (usually black) young people.

Criminalisation is something both working class and petty bourgeois elements of the community quite rightly fear and they try in various ways to combat it. The black churches and mosques do this by religion, boosting family values (patriarchal and authoritarian ones) by religious schools, etc. The NGOs and community leaders have reformist 'solutions?', youth groups, career advice centres, mentoring by role models and so on. But this is against a background of economic decline and increased state repression (including drug laws which create an illegal business to 'employ?' those capitalism will not or cannot find legal jobs). So these calls are even less likely to make a lasting difference than they did in the 1980s.

The police, backed by the Home Office, responded by flooding the streets with 16,000 officers. They plan to push thousands more police through riot training. Pressure has mounted from the Tory right and press for 'US methods?', e.g. more armed police, more invasions of estates. Expect more stop and search, dawn raids, 'pre-emptive?' arrests and shootings. Home Secretary Theresa May has told police that as well as rubber bullets, water cannon was available to them from Northern Ireland at 24 hours notice and that the government is looking at plans to introduce the power to impose general curfews during disturbances.

At least 66% of those having made their first appearance have been remanded in custody ? which will clearly include many with no previous convictions. The sheer scale of the judicial counteroffensive exposes the fact that the ruling class considers the 'riots?' to be in an important sense a political uprising. In the first week after the disturbances, there were 2,616 arrests, 1,179 cases heard by magistrates, 711 suspects remanded to jail and 115 convictions. Children account for 21% of those in court so far, with some as young as 11 receiving referral orders. Met Chief Tim Godwin said he has set a target of 3,000 convictions and his officers were investigating 20,000 hours of CCTV footage. Magistrates are being told to make an example of prisoners by handing down extraordinary sentences. Despite the fact that the widespread breakdown of law and order meant that many who would not usually cause criminal damage or

steal had the opportunity (and the adrenaline) to do so, prisoners are being punished more severely than habitual criminals. Why? Because these are kangaroo courts and the sentences are politically motivated: don't challenge the state again.

The magistrate courts have introduced evening, weekend and even all-night sittings to rush through cases arising from the riots. Young defendants have been 'advised' to plead guilty without seeing the evidence against them or even knowing the consequences or choices available to them. Magistrates have been effectively directed to deny bail and justices' clerks have advised them to hand down severe custodial sentences, e.g. six months for stealing £3.50 worth of bottled water (which would normally be dealt with by a penalty notice or caution for a first time offender) or five months in jail for a mother of two for receiving a stolen pair of shorts, by disregarding normal sentencing or even the precedents set by trials after the Bradford riots and Israeli Embassy protests. An 11-year-old has been given a six-month referral sentence for stealing a bottle of wine. To put these sentences in perspective, compare them to the guideline sentence for non-premeditated actual bodily harm resulting in minor injury, which would normally result in a community order, or at most six months in prison. In short, sentences that are at the top end of the guidelines for ABH are being given for stealing bottles of water. There are also reactionary calls for magistrates to be able to lock away defendants for 12 months, not the current six. Those who plead guilty and are referred to the crown court are being tried within a week or two.

In a calculated move 'justice' has been extended to include the families of those caught. Handling of stolen goods is being punished harshly. Most controversially Cameron and Iain Duncan Smith have called for those found guilty to have their benefits withdrawn for an undefined period and for their families to be evicted from social housing with a family in Westminster already served with an eviction notice. This involves additional punishment for those on benefits or living in social housing and collective punishment (Israeli style), not to mention the fact that such a fate would necessarily push families into destitution and further criminalise them. All socialists should raise the call for no evictions, and support campaigns to petition the neighbours and estates of those threatened and mobilise to block bailiffs, as we did during the poll tax rebellion.

Inevitably, the Tories and police have taken the opportunity to attack the use of social media network tools, notably Facebook, Twitter and Blackberry Messenger. In one of the most remarkable of the earlier sentences, two young men from the north west were each sentenced to four years for posting up a Facebook event and webpage giving a place and time for a disturbance - even though nobody turned up to riot. Tory MP Louise Mensch has called for a 'temporary shutdown' of Facebook and Twitter during disturbances. Others, like Cameron, talk about banning individuals from them. Blackberry software engineers have been called in to crack encryption codes. It all has the stench of the dictatorships of the Middle and Far East.

Political response

The Tories have been very quick, united and consistent in explaining the uprising as 'criminality pure and simple' claiming it has nothing to do with austerity or mass unemployment. This has been backed up to the hilt by the majority of the poodle press (with the exception of The Guardian) and the BBC. Even the normally liberal Krishnan Guru-Murphy from Channel 4 News tried to blame single mothers for the violence. Cameron summed it up: 'There are pockets of our society that are not only broken, but frankly sick - the problem with [looting] is a complete lack of responsibility, a lack of proper parenting, a lack of proper upbringing, a lack of proper ethics, a lack of proper morals.' We have witnessed the return of the nasty party with a vengeance: Cameron has dropped his liberal mask.

The Tories are working hard to capitalise on outrage at the riots in order to build a strong class alliance in favour of the police, public order and repression. Ideologically this means diverting attention away from cuts and social degradation and stigmatising anyone who points to these factors as soft or apologists for disorder.

Immediately this means turning to the middle layers of society. Shopkeepers are naturally inclined towards this repressive response, as are the ever larger number of middle class professionals living in the inner cities to be close to the financial and trading centres. Neoliberal Britain's twin trends of expanding the bloated finance centres while letting urban estates sink into neglect and despair have therefore combined to deliver an urban space in which a pampered petit

bourgeois layer is intermingled with the urban poor, with islets of gentrification interspersed among large run down estates in the big cities. This explains several aspects of the riots, from the trashing of posh shops in Notting Hill to the counter-mobilisation of smartly dressed middle class residents armed with brooms to clear up after the rioting.

In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, the Tories' backlash had overwhelming majority support, e.g. 200,000 people signed an online petition to deny the families of those convicted of riot offences to be denied benefits and social housing. But just a week later down this is ringing hollow; people have got over the initial shock and have had a chance to think. Can any thinking person really believe that this was all caused by a disembodied moral collapse, by a vague 'loss of responsibility?', or even by the spread of single mothers or the 'benefits culture'? Then why is it happening now, with living standards falling and jobs and college places vanishing? Even in his own constituency in leafy Oxfordshire, young people greeted his press conference with scepticism, hostility and irritation. Many of them blame the government for the rioting and one child of a single parent said he felt that his family was being criticised by Cameron.

Once the political season returns in September and October and the voices of community activists, youth workers and anti-poverty campaigners are heard, the Tories will face further opposition. Already the Liberal Democrat backbenchers are complaining at Tory policy announcements, forcing Simon Hughes and even Nick Clegg to back-pedal a bit. In practice, however, the Lib Dem leadership is pro-hardline and the rank and file have nowhere to hide, except by remaining in the Coalition and hoping the economy looks better in four years time.

Initially the Labour leadership tacked fairly close to the Tory line, but Ed Miliband has been careful to always relate the riots to social deprivation, inequality and cuts. To start with he emphasised the 20% cuts to the police, but he has broadened this out: 'this is an issue not just about the responsibility and irresponsibility we saw on the streets of Tottenham. It's about irresponsibility, wherever we find it in our society. We've seen in the past few years MPs' expenses, what happened in the banks, what happened with phone hacking.'

Miliband scored a political victory when the Tories agreed to his demand for a public inquiry ' although it will most likely be a repressive whitewash unless it is conducted under the pressure and control of local communities.

Labour has responded like this partly because it retains stronger links with the black and deprived communities in the inner cities. Through them, it remembers how the uprisings in the 1980s led initially to reactionary calls for more law and order, but within a few months to demands for measures to attack poverty and social exclusion. Although those who took part were not consciously aiming for reforms for their community, it is a fact that the 1980s riots often led to significant reforms.

The Labour left has been marginalised ' in a seven-hour Commons debate, John McDonnell was not taken to speak. Dianne Abbott and Ken Livingstone have sought to emphasise social deprivation, the cuts and inequality, sometimes distancing themselves from the Labour government of 1997-2010, but at the same time they have joined in Miliband's opportunistic call for the police cuts to be reversed and for all 'offenders' to be brought to justice and severely punished.

There may be a revival of left reformist black organisation coming out of the crisis. Lee Jasper's BARAC (Black Activists Rising Against Cuts) played a prominent role at a recent Coalition of Resistance public meeting, where more than 300 people came to hear a largely black platform link together police racism, the cuts and poverty/unemployment. The recent campaigns around the deaths in custody of Smiley Culture, Demetre Frazer and Kingsley Burrell could and should unite with the family and friends of Mark Duggan and link up with defence campaigns around those detained after the uprising. But the limits of Lee Jasper's reformism were clear during the riots when on Channel 4 he joined the calls from many in north London for more police on the streets.

The vast majority of trade union leaders have remained silent though a few came out with progressive statements. PCS leaders Mark Serwotka and Janice Godwin said: 'There will be those who will call for tougher sentencing and more police powers, but these will not solve the very deep problems facing our country. As PCS has argued, we need investment to create the jobs and build the infrastructure that our communities need. We should also resist attempts to

demonise young people in general. They have been the biggest victims of this recession. The lawlessness of the financial and political elites is a much larger problem that our society must address. Unite's Len McCluskey, on the other hand, called for calm, saying: "Those who bring turmoil to our cities must understand that their actions are unsupported." Although he did say youth unemployment and social inequality had to be dealt with, he loyally parroted the official Labour line. Some local union branches, like Lambeth Unison and RMT for example, have produced leaflets and organised meetings condemning police racism and outlining the effect of the cuts: an excellent example of what union can and should be doing.

A programme against the backlash

The August 2011 riots will be remembered as a working class youth uprising against repression, racism and the recession. Workers Power stands solidly with the youth and against the police.

Stop the kangaroo courts. Drop the charges and free the prisoners. This is class law; it's the Tories and the bankers who should be in jail for looting the country, not working class kids. Of course at the same time we do not defend people who used the riots as an excuse to rob ordinary people, burn their homes or run them over.

End the system of indiscriminate remand in custody for suspects. Build defence campaigns.

For a public inquiry, under the control of local working class organisations, youth groups, black and minority ethnic organisations, antiracist and labour movement organisations, into the death of Mark Duggan and all recent deaths in police custody. For all police officers suspected of racism or brutality to be brought to trial and if found guilty imprisoned.

No to any more police powers or weapons. Disarm the police and disband their special units, like the TSG and CO9. End stop and search which indirectly caused this uprising and directly caused the 1981 uprisings. No to plastic bullets, water cannon, dispersal orders, curfews and bans, restrictions or hacking of social network sites.

Whose streets? Our streets! Organise self defence against police attacks. These self defence organisations should be democratically controlled by the working class to defend our communities against attacks, wherever they come from: police, fascists or criminals.

For working class community action to stop attacks on ordinary people by criminal gangs. Some young people on the estates find them attractive partly because they wrongly identify gangs as anti-authority, part of a counterculture, and successful in a material world. Illegality of drugs means gangs can be lucrative and offer an alternative to dwindling employment in the legitimate sectors. We are for a mass socialist youth organisation and community action, including self-defence groups, against the gangs, and for a massive programme of state spending to create sustainable jobs for young people improving our communities.

Reverse all the cuts to schools and young people's services. For youth projects run by and for young people equipped with sports, music making and other creative facilities.

Youth need real, permanent jobs on a living wage of £9 an hour, apprenticeships/training or free education in college or university with a living grant.

Fund all these programmes of jobs and services by taxing the rich and by expropriating the banks and creating a single state bank under the control of the people.

Stop the evictions sign mass petitions, blockade homes threatened with eviction. For mass action against the suspension of benefits. A home and money for food and clothes are rights not privileges. For combative tenants associations and benefit claimants' unions.

It is no accident that these uprisings have occurred under a Tory government, in times of economic crisis, mass

unemployment and austerity. They must be linked to the fight to stop the cuts and to bring down the government. No to every cut (except cuts to the racist police). Make the bosses and bankers pay for their crisis. For coordinated action and a general strike against the cuts.

We can agree with sincere liberals and left Labour politicians in defending the rioters? civil and legal rights, we can block with them to call a halt to the stop the witch hunting, to call for more money for youth facilities, job creation and other issues. But the real answer goes beyond this. We recognise the rebellious youth, black and Asian and white, male and female, as the agents of their own liberation in a political uprising against their exploitation and oppression.

Above all the riots show that capitalism isn't working and that the youth who are the greatest victims of the system's latest crisis are filled with revolutionary anger and daring in action against the police and the rich. The task is to unite the revolutionary youth with the working class in action against the cuts and illegitimate Tory-Lib Dem Coalition, to bring down the government with a general strike and a popular rising like in Egypt, to open the road to a fight for a working class government. In the bitter struggles ahead, we will encounter both the necessity and the opportunity to rally people to a mass revolutionary youth organisation and a new revolutionary combat party.

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