

1981 Brixton riots

Racism and poverty - anger explodes

April 2011 marks the 30th anniversary of the riots in Brixton, south London, against police racism, unemployment and poverty. Today the conditions for new 'Brixtons' are being prepared. The Con-Dem government, like that of Thatcher, has adopted a programme of vicious cuts in jobs and services. Last year saw the first actual fall in living standards in Britain since the recession of three decades ago. Unemployment is rising. There are almost one million young people without jobs in Britain.

Contrary to what some said on the BBC's anniversary programme, conditions in Brixton are not vastly better than 30 years ago. There are similar numbers on the dole - 11,464 registered last year. 50% of unemployed youth in Lambeth are black. Although, following the anti-racist movements of the intervening period, we now see less open racism among the police, it has by no means disappeared.

And the £79 million of cuts, being implemented by a Labour council, in the borough will contribute to widespread misery and possible new eruptions of anger. A week ago, the Guardian referred to Lambeth as the most dangerous borough in Britain. CLARE DOYLE, dubbed 'Red Clare' in the right-wing press at the time for her participation and socialist politics (and red hair!), recounts the events.



Clare Doyle, "rioters' councillor", picture from the New Standard, July 1981

On Friday 10 April 1981 a heavy-handed police incident in Railton Road, Brixton, sparked an explosion of pent-up anger that engulfed the area for days. Psyched-up police in full riot gear, many of them openly racist, went into battle with local residents, mostly black. Pelted with bricks, stones and petrol bombs, the police were forced to retreat, some with their riot shields on fire. An angry crowd surged through the central shopping area. Two pubs were burned out, other buildings wrecked, shops had their windows smashed in and their contents were strewn across the pavements.

300 police were injured as well as hundreds of their opponents, many of them too scared to seek medical help in the hospitals. Hundreds were being arrested and summarily charged with 'rioting' and 'looting'. The most intimidating noise and sight was that of the 'Nightsun' helicopter with its searchlight and infra-red camera peering into housing estates and side streets, on the hunt for new victims to put in the police cells.

By the Sunday afternoon, however, an eerie calm had descended on the centre of Brixton. The police had set up blockades around the area with the help of massive reinforcements bussed in from outside - a total of 7,445 policemen had been mobilised for the operation. But a traffic-free and police-free zone now existed, stretching from the west of the Town Hall down to the notorious Brixton police station (whose windows had also been smashed in).

There was an almost festive atmosphere as the people of Brixton - white as well as black - wandered around to see the damage and discuss the significance of the events. They were joined by a growing number of sightseers and well-wishers.

Tories and police

Not so well-received were the Tory Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, David McNee, as they attempted a walk-about to assess the situation. Their talk of "outsiders" fomenting the violence did not wash.

Michael Heseltine, then Tory defence secretary, also visited Brixton (and later Toxteth in Liverpool where riots also took place) with a mandate to find solutions.

But he told reporters that not one extra pound of public spending would be provided by Thatcher's government. In contrast in 1984, mass action by workers in Liverpool forced the same Tory government to concede millions of pounds to the defiant Labour council, led by the Militant Tendency, the fore-runner of the Socialist Party.

The anger that had exploded in Brixton had deep roots. It was born of years of police harassment and outright brutality on top of decades of neglect and deprivation in terms of jobs, housing and social facilities. The previous April, there had been 'riots' or mass disturbances in the St Paul's area of Bristol, another run-down and predominantly black community blighted by unemployment and poverty.

The hated 'Sus' laws, which gave police powers to stop and search merely on 'suspicion', were being used against black youth far more than white. Raids on factories and homes with the aim of deporting immigrant workers were a daily occurrence.

Resentment smouldered in the black communities of south London over a number of recent racist incidents. 13 young black party-goers were killed in a fire in Deptford on the night of 18 January 1981. The police had done little or nothing to find anyone responsible for what was obviously a racially motivated attack.

Unemployment amongst black youth had reached over 50% nationally; it was rising four times faster than amongst white youth. There were 27 school-leavers for every job vacancy in Lambeth. 12,000 people were registered as unemployed at the Brixton dole office in April 1981.

A generation of black youth saw themselves already thrown on the scrap heap. Thatcher's policies were obviously going to do nothing to improve their lot; in fact, they were guaranteed to make things worse.

In Liverpool, where the Toxteth 'riots' took place, the Liberals, under David Alton, had built not one house, whereas when Labour, under the leadership of Militant, came into power, 5,000 homes were built!

Thatcher

In Brixton, the Railton Road area had been due for redevelopment since 1928 and with Thatcher's housing policy, there would now be no prospect of new homes replacing the slums. She was the real criminal, not those she blamed for inflaming the situation in the inner-city areas.

On the very Saturday of the escalation of clashes with the police in Brixton (April 11), the LPYS and Militant had organised a mock trial of Thatcher in nearby Stockwell Hall. The charges against the prime minister were: "Obtaining votes under false pretences; bribery and corruption; fraud; GBH (grievous bodily harm); murder!"

As the police were battering down the hatches in the area, two socialists who had been putting up posters had been arrested and then the organisers of the court-room farce were ordered to bring it to an end! Tension in the area was mounting by the minute.

It was no surprise when Brixton went up in flames that weekend. But as one local man commented, the only surprise was that it had not happened earlier!

On a BBC 4 discussion 'commemorating' 30 years since the Brixton events, police spoke openly about the racism that was rampant in the force. One of them recounted how, during the various police operations in the area, police officers, himself included, would attack Rastafarians with dreadlocks and literally pull their hair out from the roots. Back in the police station they would pin up the 'dreads' as trophies.

Once the April flare-up began, the LPYS and Militant supporters moved into action. They did not consider burning and looting as the way to combat the policies of Thatcher, but they understood what was behind the rage that was unleashed.

They talked to people involved in the battles, to people in local community organisations and in the Labour Party about what could be done, firstly to combat the police rampage and stop the mass arrests, and, secondly to channel this anger into a political fight against the class politics of Thatcher and her government.

They worked rapidly to organise a mass

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cartoon Alan Hardman

meeting at the Town Hall for the earliest possible date. They got out a leaflet giving their explanation of what had happened and why, and also formulating a programme of demands to express the needs of the hour.

Teams of young (and not so young) socialists went onto the streets. They distributed 30,000 of the rapidly printed leaflets in a meticulously organised door-to-door operation, covering every household in the immediate area.

They went to bus garages, fire stations, hospitals, post office and council depots, factories, local government offices, a milk yard and rail depots to explain the case and seek support. Within two days they had 1,000 signatures on a petition. They put up posters and chalked on the pavements to advertise the public meeting.

By the evening of Wednesday 15 April, 600 agitated, angry and excited people were piling into the Town Hall meeting room to hear and be heard. A resolution to send to Thatcher and her government had been drawn up. It declared that: "the responsibility for the riots in Brixton rests with the police... Also responsible are the Tories and the class they represent, whose system - being run purely for the rich - has pushed unemployment up to three million and bred poverty and slum housing".

It included demands for the immediate withdrawal of the massive police presence from the area, release of all those arrested and dropping of all charges, democratic street committees to defend

the areas, an end to stop and search, the disbandment of the hated Special Patrol Group (constantly operating mass swoops in the area), an urgent labour movement inquiry and the "release of funds from central government to be put back into the community".

As the meeting began, someone stood up to insist on an amendment to the very first phrase of the resolution. Instead of "This meeting declares", it should read, "We the people of Brixton, declare...!" That was agreed with a roar of approval. The confidence and enthusiasm of the meeting was palpable.

Many young people signed up to come to an LPYS meeting. Within the next two days 100 were visited and phoned. 45 came to the meeting that weekend.

Little more than a month later, there were 700 youth packed into a benefit gig, also at the Town Hall, with a bar and a popular band called Aswad playing. The group UB40, along with MPs and many local organisations, including the trades council made contributions towards a fund for assisting the hundreds of arrested people being dragged through the courts.

The Labour Committee for the Defence of Brixton (LCDB) was rapidly set up, involving local black residents' representatives, shop stewards, councillors, lawyers and Labour Party members.

Among them were Bob Lee, secretary of the PNP black socialist youth organisation, Tony Sauniois, then on Labour's National Executive Committee from the

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Building support for a socialist response to the repression and riots photo the Socialist

LPYS, Anne Beales, chair of the London region of the LPYS, local solicitor, Mike Fisher, and two members of Militant's editorial board who lived in the area - Lynn Walsh and myself.

The LCDB came out immediately against the government's proposal for a police inquiry into the Brixton events to be led by Lord Scarman. Why? Firstly, it was precisely that - a police inquiry! Secondly, it was set up by the Tories who were the ones to blame for all the problems that caused the 'riots'. Thirdly, no one giving evidence to the inquiry would be sure not to find themselves incriminated and under arrest!

Lord Scarman had the dubious record of heading a 1969 'Tribunal of Inquiry' into the 'disturbances' in Northern Ireland without putting forward any solution.

The LCDB called for a totally independent labour movement inquiry as a launch pad for a socialist campaign to solve the major social problems behind the outbreaks of violence.

Although the 1974-79 Labour governments had moved decisively from reform to counter-reform, with attempts at restraining wages and attacking the hard-won gains of the working class, now that the Tories were in power, the Labour Party was under pressure to shift to the left.

On its NEC, the LPYS representative pushed for a national demonstration against Tory policies and rising unemployment. Instead, they organised demonstrations around the country, which turned out to be massive.

In Lambeth, as well as many other working class strongholds, unlike today, the local Labour Parties were still relatively combative and socialist, at least in name. Labour councillors and MPs responded favourably to the efforts of the Lambeth LPYS and sent money and support to the LCDB. The London Labour Party Executive circulated the LCDB material, as did the district of-

fices of the NUPE, TGWU and AUJEW trade unions.

The most important task of socialists at that time was to expose the real causes of the uprising in Brixton. They demanded radical changes in policing practice as well as an end to the Thatcher government. They also campaigned for a Labour government on a socialist programme to take its place - something unthinkable today!

Socialists warned that, unless the cuts and attacks on public spending were reversed and the harassment of black and Asian communities by the police was stopped, there would be more flare-ups - in Brixton and in other inner-city deprived areas.

In early July, while tens of thousands of activists were marching in Cardiff on one of the Labour Party protests against unemployment, the Liverpool area of Toxteth exploded, then Salford, then Bristol again and Birmingham and 20 or so other towns and cities across Britain.

Militant

Militant received a sudden flurry of publicity in the press and on TV when 'Red Clare' appeared in Toxteth at the time of the violent clashes there. We used this opportunity to explain who the real culprits were - Thatcher and the Tories. We did not condone, but understood the actions of the harassed and desperate youth of these deprived areas of Britain.

Towards the end of July, Brixton kicked off again. Police decided to raid eleven households in the Railton Road area on the pretext that they were where Molotov cocktails had been manufactured and stored.

They wrecked people's homes and terrified whole families. A new uprising was in the making.

The Labour Committee for the Defence of Brixton was still busy with the work of

taking evidence from victims of the April conflagration and monitoring the level of police activity in the area. It moved into action immediately - condemning the action of the police thugs and demanding compensation for all those affected by the raids.

The events of 1981 - the levels of police violence and racism that were revealed and the 'findings' of the Scarman Inquiry - led to the stepping up of attempts to introduce 'community policing'.

Militant and the LPYS took the idea further, calling for democratic control over the police and policing and the right of the police to organise in unions and to strike.

In the year before the Brixton explosion, a mood was developing for the TUC trade union leadership to call a general strike against the Tories and their austerity programme. This was eventually watered down into a 'day of action'.

Similar demands are developing today and a similar reluctance to take action is displayed on the part of the TUC leaders. If they do not move into action, the scenes of despair and explosions of anger like those of 1981 will be back on our streets. Deprived areas of major cities - if not the central areas, then the 'banlieues' or outskirts as in France - will be the scene of new conflagrations.

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Socialism is less heard of today than in 1981 but the struggle for nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy and democratic planning to solve the major problems in society is more urgent than ever.