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Britain

Neo-liberalism in Britain reaps what it sows

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The first year of David Cameron's Conservative-led coalition in Britain was marked by austerity; increased inequality; rapid impoverishment of millions of people; corruption in the media, police and politicians and destruction of public services. Its second year looks set to be marked by massive industrial action and open conflict with the state in the poorest parts of British cities by the people with least to lose. That is the significance of the riots that have been taking place across Britain in early August.

The immediate cause were two actions by the police. The first of these was the killing by armed police officers of Mark Duggan on Thursday August 5 and the subsequent treatment of his family – including their failure to even visit them to inform them of Mark's death.

A justifiably angry demonstration gathered outside the local police station on Saturday August 7. The police refused to even come out and make a statement. It was the police behaviour then that detonated the riot, a fact that has been omitted from virtually all the subsequent reporting.

As this eyewitness account makes plain the police attacked a 16-year-old girl with batons. This video clip <http://youtube.com/watch?v=RjT68msx...> captures something of the violence of the police behaviour. It was virtually inevitable that aggression of that sort would provoke a paroxysm of rage among the local community.

Reports from other parts of the country tell similar stories, each with their own twist but with the common theme – in the East London borough of Hackney and in Birmingham in the West Midlands for example.

There are reports of increased harassment of young people just for being on the streets at any time of day, including the extensive use of the notorious stop and search powers which are deeply hated by the black community, especially young black men against whom they are generally targeted. Black people are 26 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people.

Unusually the Independent Police Complaints Commission has moved quite quickly in the case of Mark Duggan, reporting on August 9 that its initial ballistics report showed that he had not fired at police officers, giving the lie to rumours that had been spread in the media that the police were acting in self-defence. However no one has any confidence that justice will be done in this case – there is a long history of deaths at the hands of the police but not one single officer has ever been prosecuted.

And while lack of trust in the police is particularly strong – for good material reasons, in the black community, events over the last few years have increased broader disquiet. The death of newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson at the hands of police during the G20 protests in London on April 1 2009 and then the brutal batoning of disabled student activist Jody McIntyre during last year's student demonstrations flashed images of police violence into many homes that had not noticed the tactics being tested out on the black community for many years.

Neo-liberalism's chickens are coming home to roost. In Haringey, the area where Mark Duggan lived, the local government's Â£41 million (US\$ 67 million) cuts have devastated the borough's youth provision. This is a pattern common to most inner city areas – youth provision has been one of first areas hit by Cameron's austerity strategy. At the same time, the government scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, which gave 630,000 young people the economic possibility of continuing in secondary or further education beyond the age of 16, as well as the

tripling of tuition fees for university students has increased frustration, anger and a sense that no one cares what happens to this generation of young people. These are just some of the factors that have created the pressure cooker that has exploded over recent days.

Last month the local Tottenham MP David Lammy demanded government action to deal with a 10% rise in unemployment in his constituency that now has 10,514 people seeking work. Local residents have been saying in interviews that thousands of people in their late 20's have never been able to find a job. It's no surprise then that the shops selling designer sportswear, mobile phones and state of the art TVs and MP3 players are being looted by people who know that they'll never earn enough to buy these things.

The capitalists can't have it both ways. On one hand they say you need these things for status and to feel fulfilled and on the other most of the jobs on offer pay poverty wages on short-term contracts where they exist at all.

By contrast the very rich have never had it so good in living memory. The High Pay Commission reported on August 8 that executives in FTSE 100 companies received average annual pensions worth around Â£175,000 (US\$ 285,000). The average British pension is a paltry Â£5,860 (US\$ 9,550) and this government want to make working people poorer still. At the same time they are hell bent on transferring vast sums of money to the 300,000 people who pay the top rate of 50% tax on earnings over Â£150 000 (US\$ 245,000) per year. London Mayor Boris Johnson has called for it to be scrapped and his millionaire chum George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer has said he wants to get rid of it.

No wonder that many have made the point that these are the real looters, the real criminals. One letter in yesterday's Guardian newspaper put it thus: "The rioters are only doing to the high street what the bankers did to the country. Unlike the bankers, the rioters will no doubt be held to account." Leftwing Labour MP John McDonnell wrote in the same paper: "We are reaping what has been sown over the last three decades of creating a grotesquely unequal society with an ethos of grab as much as you can by any means. A society of looters created with MPs and their expenses, bankers and their bonuses, tax-evading corporations, hacking journalists, bribe-taking police officers, and now a group of alienated kids are seizing their chance..."

These things may not have been on the minds of the teenagers who were grabbing Â£100 trainers from JD Sports. What they did know was that there are people out there who have wealth and privilege and are using their power to keep millions of people poor. A riot is a spasm of destructive anger and inarticulate protest but it is one of the ways the voiceless make themselves heard.

We have to resist attempts to use what has happened on the streets since Mark Duggan's death to further crack down on civil liberties and attack the right to protest. Rubber bullets have been issued more widely to police on the streets of mainland Britain than ever before – we know how lethal they can be from their use in the North of Ireland. Water cannon have never been used here, but will now be available to the police at 24-hours notice, while bringing in the army is still being debated.

It is very positive that anti-cuts organisations such as the Coalition of Resistance and most particularly Black Activists Rising Against The Cuts (BARAC) have made their voices heard, talking about the real causes of this unrest, and the policies that need to be implemented to give poor communities a future and give young people new hope. In the coming months the unions and the radical left have to make their voices heard and start rolling back the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's offensive.