

Britain's far-right riots: The class issues

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The anti-immigrant riots that erupted this week in cities across the UK represent the most concerted efforts since the 1930s to develop a fascist movement in Britain.

Seizing on the murder of three children in Southport, England, last Monday, far-right demagogues including Tommy Robinson falsely claimed the perpetrator was a Muslim asylum-seeker, inciting pogrom-like attacks on mosques and migrant hostels, and hotels which have continued over the weekend.

Thugs have attacked immigrants' homes and shops, smashing windows, setting fire to property and physically assaulting black and minority youth. These are the rioters defended this week by Reform UK MPs Richard Tice and Nigel Farage as "concerned British citizens."

Rioters wrapped in England flags, wearing far-right emblems and describing themselves as an "army of patriots" have branded Muslims as "rapists" and demanded the mass deportation of asylum-seekers to "save our kids." Their core comprises far-right activists, dragging behind them lumpen workers and youth who have engaged in looting and vandalism.

Presently, the forces mobilised by Robinson and his backers, whose rally last Saturday in Trafalgar Square attracted up to 30,000, are outweighed by the hundreds of thousands who have protested the Gaza genocide. Over the weekend, fascists were also outnumbered in many cities by anti-fascist demonstrators and by local residents who came to the defence of immigrant communities. But the unprecedented scenes of rioters attacking immigrants and giving the Nazi salute are a grave warning.

It is the duty of the working class to come to the defence of immigrants and asylum-seekers, including protecting mosques and migrant hostels from attack. But this cannot be pursued in isolation from the necessary political struggle against the root cause of this malignant social development.

This week's riots have not come from nowhere. The growth of fascist and far-right tendencies are a concentrated expression of imperialist politics and capitalist decay. The ruling elites are promoting extreme nationalism and xenophobia to divert explosive social tensions in a right-wing, anti-immigrant direction, to further Britain's predatory imperialist wars and to prosecute war against the democratic and social rights of the working class.

Developments in Britain reflect global processes. In the United States there is the prospect of a fascistic presidency led by Donald Trump. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally has emerged as a major political force, while in Germany the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is gaining support. Far-right governments rule in Italy, Hungary and Finland.

Such movements, cultivated for decades, are the outcome of the naked turn by the ruling class to militarism, war and austerity.

Labour's Home Secretary Yvette Cooper declared this week's riots

"do not represent Britain." In reality, successive Labour and Tory governments are responsible for the toxic events on Britain's streets.

Labour denounces far-right "violence and thuggery" as it funnels billions to NATO's proxy-war in Ukraine, backing Zelensky's dictatorial regime that rests on neo-Nazis. Starmer defends the "right" of Israel's fascist government to wage genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza that has killed more than 186,000 people, the vast majority women and children.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects Starmer's announcement of law-and-order measures to combat the far right, including a national policing unit "to tackle violent disorder." As always, the real target of such repressive measures, including facial recognition technology, is the left. This is already indicated by the lengthy jail sentences imposed on Just Stop Oil activists for merely *planning* protests over climate change.

Decades-long assault on socialism

The far right's ability to exploit social grievances is an indictment of the parties of the official "left" and their decades-long assault on the working class and socialism.

Under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Labour repudiated policies of social reform and became a Thatcherite party of the financial oligarchy. The working class was politically disenfranchised, with Blair declaring that "class war is dead."

Only one side of the class war was ended. Billionaire wealth has risen by more than 1,000 percent since 1989, with the number of billionaires tripling to 164 since 2010. Over the same period, the average worker lost £10,200 through wage suppression enforced through record-low strike activity policed by the trade union bureaucracy.

One-fifth of people in the UK live in poverty, and 25 percent of all children. Nearly 3 million rely on food banks. For the poorest 10 percent of UK households, living standards have fallen by 20 percent compared with 2019–20—a drop in income of £4,600.

Underpinning this, Labour embraced war and militarism. Blair ordered British troops into combat five times, more than any other prime minister in British history. Islamophobia was weaponised to justify war crimes, including the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Domestically, the "war on terror" was used to overturn core democratic and legal rights, with policies such as the Prevent Strategy demonising Muslims, and a "hostile environment" against immigrants and asylum-seekers cultivated.

While the trade union bureaucracy suppressed industrial action, representatives of the pseudo-left promoted gender, race and identity

politics that served to divide the working class along the same lines promoted by the Tories and the far right.

Labour's right-wing offensive ended with Brown's imposing the full burden of the 2008 global financial crisis onto the backs of the working class, paving the way for 14 years of Conservative rule. The resulting "Age of Austerity" was accompanied by the most virulent forms of nationalism and xenophobia, culminating in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

The Socialist Equality Party wrote, in calling for a boycott of the referendum, that this was "an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class."

Those pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, who espoused a "left leave" Brexit vote helped subordinate the working class to the most right-wing factions of the British ruling class. This was epitomised by the "left-right" alliance struck between George Galloway and Nigel Farage. As the SEP wrote: "Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences."

The Brexit campaign saw the rise of Farage's UK Independence Party and Boris Johnson's eventual installation as prime minister. They shifted the Tory Party ever more openly in a fascist direction, vilifying Muslims and asylum-seekers via military-style campaigns against boat arrivals on the English Channel, culminating in the "Rwanda Solution."

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn systematically blocked opposition in the working class to this right-wing offensive. Betraying his millions of supporters who wanted to end the Blairites' control over the party, Corbyn protected the right from expulsion and upheld its core policies including support for NATO and Trident nuclear weapons, allowing a free vote on the bombing of Syria and instructing Labour councils to enforce Tory cuts. He capitulated to the witch-hunt against Labour Party members, refusing to challenge manufactured charges of "left-wing anti-Semitism," culminating in the transfer of power to Keir Starmer.

Starmer, who pledged during a year-long election campaign to defend King and Country, leads the most right-wing government in British political history. He has pledged a "triple lock" on Britain's nuclear weapons programme, while trailing £23 billion in spending cuts, including axing winter fuel payments for the elderly.

In the weeks leading up to the anti-Muslim riots, Labour was sabre-rattling against Iran and sending boats and planes to the Middle East as part of a US-led military buildup. Its domestic policies targeting asylum-seekers are linked to these foreign policy objectives, with Cooper promising a "summer offensive" of raids and arrests to deport illegal immigrants.

The working class struggle for socialism

In their response to this week's fascist riots, the SWP, Stop the War Coalition and Stand Up to Racism are silent on Labour's role as enablers for the far right. Instead, they are closing ranks around the Starmer government, claiming it has been forced to the left. The SWP writes, "Labour has been forced into concessions around Palestine, pay and migrant detention centres since winning office," concluding:

"It's a sign that Labour can be pushed to concede to demands."

The SWP and similar organizations represent the interests of the affluent middle class, oriented and tied to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy. They are experts in political deception, directed against the political independence of the working class.

The past decade has witnessed a pronounced shift by masses of workers and youth to the left, including mass protests against the Gaza genocide, the 2022–23 strike wave and the movement behind Corbyn. But the Achilles heel each time has been the political subordination of the working class to the Labour Party, blocking the fight for socialism. Herein lies the source of the far right's strength.

In April 2019, *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board Chairman David North introduced a lecture at Wayne State University in Detroit on the rehabilitation of the far right in Germany: "The Threat of Fascism and How to Fight It."

North described the origins of fascism in the 1920s and '30s under Mussolini and Hitler as the conscious response by the ruling class to the Russian Revolution and to the construction in the working class of mass communist parties to fight for socialism.

He explained: "What is now beginning to take place throughout the world after so many decades in which the class struggle was suppressed ... is a growing movement throughout the world of the working class against conditions that exist. The ruling elites see this. They know where this is going. They feel the threat. And their response to this threat is to move further and further to the right, to begin preparing for massive confrontations, and that is why they begin to encourage the growth of fascist movements."

North concluded: "The challenge is to provide that great mass of the working population with a political program, with a perspective, and for that you require the development of a conscious revolutionary movement, a conscious political party. If that is done, if the objective conditions are acted upon, not only can fascism be defeated, but we can establish a socialist society. That is our perspective."

The Socialist Equality Party and our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting for the development of an international anti-war movement, uniting all sections of the working class against war, austerity and fascism, in the worldwide struggle for socialism. That is the answer the working class must give to the far-right danger.



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