

The August Uprising in Britain - A Report

Report of the RKOB delegation on its visit in London in August 2011

The RKOB considers the uprising of the poor, blacks and immigrants in Britain as a "historic moment" - to put it in the words of the black civil rights activist Darcus Howe. The RKOB therefore decided at the start of the uprising to send a delegation of several comrades to London to study the events in the area. For this purpose we reproduced and distributed several English language pamphlets from the RKOB and the youth organization Red Antifa in London. We have outlined our analysis of the uprising and the revolutionary tactics and the necessary lessons from the defeat in three articles. (1) Below we publish the first part of the report from the RKOB delegation.

Thursday August 11, 2011

5:00 PM- 7:00 PM

After almost 24 hours of riding the bus we arrived in London. Even from the bus we could see various shops that have their displays covered with wood. Many police cars were driving past on a regular basis as well as a number of police officers patrolling the streets. We went directly after the bus ride (with all of our gear) to a meeting of the "Coalition of Resistance" platform.

On the way there we met an activist of the platform named Francis. He is an unemployed young black man in his twenties. The meeting resulted in a very interesting conversation about unemployment and poverty in the neighborhood (he is from the Peckham neighborhood) and about how to evaluate of the so-called "riots", the uprising of the young people. A longer conversation results as we are walking for some time to the university where the meeting takes place. In light of the discussions with Francis, it becomes very clear how important it is to build a revolutionary party that has roots in the organized working class and especially in the most oppressed layers within its ranks.

Until now the labor movement has widely ignored precisely these layers; the nationally or racially oppressed, the young people, etc. Due to the ongoing treason of the reformist leadership through their close links with the capitalist system there are increasing sectors of the masses which are not organized in the unions. At the same time however, it is often the most oppressed layers of society that choose the radical forms of protest against that state and the oppressive apparatus. The RKOB advocates that the labor movement organizes the most oppressed layers, and that we as an organization aiming to build a revolutionary party include activists from such layers. Today a large part of the comrades in the ranks of the RKOB are from amongst the lowest strata of the working class. Francis saw this as an positive characteristic of our organisation.

7:00 PM - 9:30 PM

The meeting of the "Coalition of Resistance" has begun. This is an alliance of several left-wing groups and trade unionists that was formed against the austerity policies of the Tory government. Quite a number of speakers are planned for the platform. It is obvious that the audience is made up primarily of activists from different groups and there are few unorganized activists, such as Francis. Therefore the proportion of workers, immigrants, and black activists is very small.

Inevitably the question of the uprising is an issue at the meeting. Two main positions are represented. One position condemns the uprising as "chaotic riots" that bring nothing but harm, even if the anger of the youth is understandable. The other position calls for neither condemning nor supporting the so-called "riots" with an emphasis on a great understanding of the frustration of the youth against the system. The dominance of these views is not surprising given the positions of the left-wing organizations to the uprisings. The labor movement has at best ignored the uprising, and at worst condemned it. This position is shared by the opportunist left. Additionally the young proletarian rebels are exactly from those strata of the working class, which has been largely ignored for decades by the left. This has become particularly obvious today. We recognize to what extent the aristocratism, which we have even identified in the LFI, is present throughout the British left. London is burning, therefore there are incredible opportunities to intervene in a very radical protest - but the left-wing organizations in fact focus mainly on themselves.

We were only impressed by the fiery speech from a black woman on the panel whose son was killed by the police in May. The mother of Demetre Fraser denounced the police as murderers and emphasized how obvious the police violence against blacks is a burning issue. In contrast to the position that the CWI (2) holds, police officers are not "workers in uniform", but part of the bourgeois apparatus which is used against the working class. The slogan "Murderers in uniform" therefore is quite accurate. At the same time from the podium, however - totally contrary to the obvious facts - it is stressed that only peaceful protests make sense. It is even stated indirectly that support from the Coalition of Resistance will only be given to actions that proceed "peacefully".

After the speeches from the podium there is a round of discussion in which the audience can participate. We, from the RKOB, take part. Nina Gunic, RKOB spokeswoman, confirms that the characterizations of police as murderers in uniform are not only true in Britain, but world wide. She argues that the events in London show just how naive it is to have illusions in peaceful protests. The goal must rather be an indefinite general strike in connection with the organizing of youth uprisings. The government cannot be simply overthrown peacefully. Rather - at a certain point - it will use its apparatus of repression against the general strike. Thus it is an absolute illusion to believe that it is possible to overthrow the government with a peaceful protest. Total solidarity with the uprising of the young people is necessary and the connection of actions by the workers' movement with the uprising is what is needed.

Except us, there is only a female activist from the SWP (3) that emphasizes solidarity with the uprising of the youth. It is obvious that it is currently an unpopular solution in the ranks of the British left. Given the massive uprisings in the past few days this is a pure betrayal against the proletarian youth. Each organization on the ground that now shuns open solidarity and organized participation in the uprisings has failed the test of history.

Events such as this uprising show whether organizations have a Marxist program only in words, or if they are capable to put this into practice and by this shows to be capable to lead the vanguard in the class struggle. It is characteristic for centrism to shun the latter like the plague. This is true even if the organization has a revolutionary program, as is still the case with the LFI, and certainly not the SWP, CWI or IMT which have centrist programs.

We suspect that interventions in the working class districts of London will be very modest from these forces and are curious about what will happen in the coming days.

10:30 PM - 2:00AM

Later in the evening we try to find out about where there will be more uprisings. We are prepared for any action with both our agitational and propaganda materials as well as practical participation. But the night is rather calm.

Friday August 12, 2011

7:30 AM - 1:00 PM

We're preparing for a day in Tottenham. The materials are packed. The youth community centers of the city and the focal point of the events are our focus. The plan is clear: we will try to talk to the residents of the neighborhood as well as get an impression of the situation on the ground. Moreover, it is important to get a closer knowledge of the area in order not to run into dead ends or similar mistakes during the evening. We get a cheap camera because we are taking photos as well as recording video.

2:00 PM - 7:00 PM

As we arrive in Tottenham we are surprised; there are very few people on the street. We go through the apartment blocks of Tottenham. Children under 10 years old are playing on the streets. An adult comes along now and then. The mood is depressed. We take some time to look around the residential area more closely. There is garbage not just out on the street, but even on the intermediate floors. To a large extent the children wear tattered clothes and are very thin. They laugh and play. As we look around we listen with half an ear to what the children are saying. A young black boy is talking loudly with a friend and says that his older brother has still not come home. His family does not know where he is but the police will surely know. He looks forward to being older because no one will catch him. His parents only say that it was high time for something to happen. One time in the future the police will arrest him anyway, no matter what he had done. At least there was some kind of resistance. But the friend should keep that to himself. The boy's parents do not like that he overheard their conversation.

As Marxists we know that the repression by the police and the entire state apparatus will come over the activists as well as large sections of the racially and nationally oppressed. Because the organized labor movement has still not taken the side of the proletarian youth – and without this it is the petty-bourgeois community leader that act as the only spokespersons.

We get confirmation by a number of reports, that the community leaders mobilize community members to talk to young people in order to stop them from continuing the uprising. The slogan "we do not destroy our own neighborhoods" was spread by the churches, mosques, community centers and other facilities. They urge the people to demonstrate "peacefully." In this way pressure is build up and the protests are stifled.

We go from the residential area over to the main streets. Meanwhile, it is already afternoon. We have become familiar with Tottenham and we get along very well with the people in the neighborhood. They are mostly blacks and immigrants. We get their attraction by our appearance. Most whites in the area are not citizens, but police officers. The workers district has apparently received only rare visits by activist leftist organizations. The MLCP (4) is the only organization that has left their mark in the district using stickers and graffiti.

As we go down the main street up to Enfield (a northern suburb above Tottenham) we are surprised: the shops that were demolished were mostly betting offices. Several shops are covered with wood planks, but these are not the ones with little glass left in their window sills. The betting offices, on the other hand, have fine pieces of glass everywhere which is not easy for someone to clean up. Many stores also have preventive covered the windows with wood, not because they were attacked. This is a fact that both journalists and people would not perceive as they drive past. We were encouraged with this realization, especially because it belongs to an observation that one can only make on site.

We get into a conversation with a young black woman named Laura. At first she is very distant. She does not tell us very much and says that she rejects the "riots". We don't agree with her but rather emphasize that the uprisings deserve support and that it is important to show solidarity or try to participate. We tell her that we have even traveled from Austria because we believe that this is a very important event and if possible will attend. Of course it is wrong to attack local shops and residential blocks, but if it happens it is because there is no organization to the protests, no leadership. This is not the fault of the young people, but rather the leaders of the organized labor movement. Our English is obviously not the best, but we are able to understand each other. She smiles during our statement and suddenly her tone changes and we see that the statement from her was out of pure caution. She believed us and probably no longer thought we were trying to trick her. She then tells us that her sister and friends have participated in the uprisings. She did not go because her sister did not want her to go. Since then her sister has been in hiding because the CCTVs (video cameras) might have captured her on tape. We talk for a while, then she gets a phone call and we say goodbye.

The conversation was very important because it confirmed to us how serious the political mistakes of the union are not to organize lower layers of the workers en masse. Likewise, there is a lack of a revolutionary youth organization that focuses clearly on these layers. Even though there are a number of leftist organizations in Britain and some even play an important part in the international leadership of these organizations, their distance and ignorance of these layers is more than devious. Not surprisingly Laura knew of none of these groups. She will not be the only one in Tottenham.

7:00 PM - 12:30 AM

It is slowly but surely getting dark outside. This also increases the proportion of police officers on the street. We can't be traveling for more than two minutes without running into police officers, usually a man and a woman. So far we have only seen white police officers. They wear yellow safety vests that say "community support." This so-called support does not mean that they aren't armed. On the contrary, they are in full gear with just different vests than the other police officers.

What we observe: the police patrolling in vehicles and at every few meters the stop without reason cars to control the drivers. Some of them hide around corners, some behind a bus station such that oncoming drivers cannot see the police car behind it. They not only search the car and write down the information from their identity cards, they also interrogate the drivers asking where they were for the past few days and also urge them to tell if any of the drivers' friends or family participated in the "riots." Not surprisingly we see how the police officers control only the black residents and immigrants with a slightly darker skin tone. Not so much amongst the pedestrians on the street but amongst the car drivers there is a significant proportion of white people. But during our entire stay the police never stopped them once. We constantly hear police car sirens. Likewise, we see how every hour a helicopter makes several rounds over Tottenham.

We notice a phone booth that was destroyed, but only the glass was smashed. The phone itself works perfectly. Also the glass was shattered at many bus stops. Traffic sign posts are slightly bent. The latter probably happened rather before the uprising when cars had sideswiped them, as a single activist would not have the force to bend them. Today we did not see a single dwelling or a single shop that was destroyed. The only things we saw destroyed were: four betting offices (two William Hills, Coral, and one other), a bank, two ATMs, bus stops and the mentioned phone booth.

Despite or perhaps because of the constant police patrols, it remains calm this night – if one leaves aside the constant police harassment. We got news about the ongoing arrest of activists. It is said that there have been more than 1,600 arrested today. The repression seems to be in full force. We suspect that the climax of the uprisings has been crossed. The current slowdown will continue for some time. A massive wave of reactionary agitation is sweeping the country which is hard to put into words. We get several newspapers, all of which denounce the rebels as "looters" and proclaim one or another store owner as a "local hero" because they were against the alleged hooligans and were set up for defense. Interestingly there were no blacks amongst these "local heroes" but most were white with a few migrants thrown in.

The rag "London Evening Standard" (a free newspaper) even launched a campaign report with the slogan "SOS - Save Our Shops!" On the way home, after midnight, we read in today's edition an article about the uncle of Mark Duggan. He is a supposed felon and had more weapons stockpiled than a police station. This clearly attempts to defame Duggan, who was executed by the police, as a member of a family of crime. It is particularly obvious, especially in such reports, that "independent press" does not exist. Under the class system, the press writes in the service of the ruling class. The ruling class in Britain has an interest in denouncing the uprising. The bourgeoisie press is an important tool for this.

We get ready and go home. It's after midnight and leaving aside the police operations there are no further incidents. It is very quiet on the streets. We realize how unusual this is because normally most shops were open until midnight.

(1) Nina Gunić and Michael Pröbsting: These are not „riots" – this is an uprising of the poor in the cities of Britain! The strategic task: From the uprising to the revolution!; Michael Pröbsting: The August uprising of the poor and nationally and racially oppressed in Britain: What would a revolutionary organisation have done?; Michael Pröbsting: Five days that shook Britain but didn't wake up the left. The bankruptcy of the left during the August uprising in Britain: Its features, its roots and the way forward.

(2) Committee for a Workers International. The English section is the Socialist Party.

(3) Socialist Workers Party, British section of the International Socialist Tendency whose historic leader has been the deceased Tony Cliff.

(4) Marxist-Leninist Communist Party. A left-Stalinist party based in Turkey/North Kurdistan which has a base amongst migrants in Western Europe.