

We Want to RIOT, not to WORK: The 1981 Brixton Uprisings, London, 1982.

Introduction

As this pamphlet goes to press, it is now one year since the April 1981 Brixton uprising, which was followed by uprisings throughout England in July. Since then the surface appearance here in Brixton has changed a lot. On the High Street the gentrifiers have been busy at work, welcoming visitors to Brixton 'and its famous market' in hope of some tourist trade. On the Frontline, the corrugated iron stretches even further, now covered with graffiti about Poland! Apparently the (Labour Party-controlled) Lambeth Council policy has been to erase immediately any slogans about working class revolt here at home but not those about such revolt elsewhere.

What has changed since last year's uprisings? At least since February, a police helicopter has often been seen hovering over Brixton. It has given instructions to police cars on the Loughborough Estate, where stop-and-search operations are still frequent. It has also been conducting night operations, shining its searchlight all over the area -- previously a familiar sight only to nationalist areas of Northern Ireland.

Now there has just been the release of 'mugging' statistics according to ethnic origin. At a time of increasing attacks on black people both by the state and by racist groups and individuals, this police tactic can be seen only as a provocation. We also know that the police have given Lambeth Council officials secret instructions for the forthcoming Easter weekend, which marks the anniversary of the April uprising. Also the Council has just constructed flower boxes in all the open spaces in the shopping area on Brixton Road. Perhaps the boxes are intended merely to prettify the area but they also, conveniently, make it difficult for crowds to gather in those strategic spaces.

Meanwhile the most important aspects of daily life remain little changed. The police have gradually resumed their stop-and-search harassment of working class (and especially black) youth on the streets. Long-term squats on the Frontline are receiving eviction notices. We still get up and trudge off to useless and boring jobs, or sign on at the dole office for our fortnightly Giro cheques from the DHSS. Even though the uprisings didn't transform those fundamental conditions of work, wages and policing, for us they marked at least a temporary shift in social relations.

We enjoyed the breakdown of the authority normally imposed by the market economy upon our lives, as the experience of 'shopping without money' gave a new, unintended meaning to Brixton's 'famous market' and freed us from the compulsion to buy and sell.

We're now recalling the uprisings neither to evoke romantic memories nor to make detached 'analysis'. Rather, we present this pamphlet with the feeling that we're emerging from 'the coldest winter in 30 years' into what could be the hottest summer yet. We hope that the material in this pamphlet contributes some insight useful to any struggles yet to come-whether or not they take the same form as last year.

It's important for us to say that all the contributors to this pamphlet are white. Recognising the centrality of black resistance to racism in the uprisings, we describe how such resistance became a larger entry point for our own refusal of mere 'survival' as waged or unwaged workers, as women, etc. Although we have experienced exploitation, harassment and coercion in somewhat different ways than black and Asian people, we came to fight the same battles in the streets against the same enemy-the police. At the same time, we are all too aware that tensions between blacks and whites, men and women, persist after the uprisings.

This pamphlet contains three main sections, each dealing with the events on a different level and each written by different contributors.

1) 'IT WAS THE THING TO DO'

Generalisations about events are hardly useful unless they reflect the experience of those involved in them. The contributors to the first section express their thoughts, feelings and aspirations during the course of the April uprising. The first account also gives some background information about Brixton and the events that led up to the uprising. All these accounts were originally written just afterwards but until now remained unpublished (except for the first one, which we reprint from *Freedom*).

Ironically enough, we entitle this entire section after a quotation in the Scarman Report from a black youth explaining why he had taken part in the riots: 'It was the thing to do.' Our accounts help to explain how the initial incident set off an uprising attracting a much broader participation than simply black male youth; at the same time, they pose the question of why it did not extend even further in time span and territory.

II) THE IMPOSSIBLE CLASS

The right-left debate over the uprisings has centred upon the question of whether and how unemployment may have caused them. Our second section gets beyond such sterile sociology. Rather than scrutinize relative unemployment statistics, we look at the newly emerging class composition that defies both orthodox class analysis and the state's containment strategies. Street confrontations can be understood as resulting from the system's failure to police the capitalist labour market through more subtle means, given the recent transformation in the nature of employment as well as unemployment, especially as a restructured economy comes to require far less skilled, permanent labour power. Unemployment can be said to have 'caused' the uprisings only in that it has served to shift a major point of class confrontation from the workplace onto the streets, but it has certainly not generated mass demands for yet more wage-labour.

The article also looks critically at that old cliché, 'the community'. The term normally evokes the traditional proprietary 'community' encompassing the authority of teachers, shopkeepers, family structure, etc. The uprisings, however, marked a breakdown of that respectable community as it gave way to a new oppositional community that the state must try to disorganise. 'The Impossible Class' ends by asking how to build 'an oppositional community of creative activity which can defend itself against the state and political parties... building on the more creative moments of the recent revolts'.

(This entire article is based on a much longer one originally written just after the July uprisings. The full version appears in a supplement to *Anarchy*, no.33 but without the new beginning specially written for this pamphlet.)

III) FROM OFFENCE TO DEFENCE TO ?

The third section approaches the problem in view of the aftermath of the uprisings. Although a riot can't continue indefinitely without a general revolutionary upheaval, it can nevertheless contribute to bringing about such a situation. However, so far we have seen our riots followed mostly by repression, isolation and division among those who, for a while, joined together as an insurgent community. How do we get beyond that dead-end cycle?

Just after the July riots, for example, the crowd in a Wolverhampton courtroom almost succeeded in freeing their mates from the dock. However, during the winter, hundreds of people faced prison sentences in the same kind of isolation that prevailed beforehand. Capitalism will continue to defeat us if rebellion remains confined to the warmest months, to special anniversaries or to counter-attacks against only the most blatant police provocations -- ultimately leaving the initiative with the state.

With these problems in mind, the article looks at the inability of the Brixton defence groups to sustain the 'creative moments' of the revolts, instead expressing a disorganisation and powerlessness which limited the July uprising as much as did the advance in police tactics then. The article makes tentative suggestions for possible new organisational forms for defending the targets of state repression and for generalising the rebellion of the oppositional community. Whenever we do reach a point of confrontation leading to the next uprising, the groundwork could already be laid for taking it beyond defence of ghetto territory, towards transforming the whole of daily life, destroying the rule of capital and the state.

To conclude our Introduction, we remind readers that our contributors mostly live in the Brixton area, so the writing naturally emphasizes the situation there. Although we sometimes refer to events in other cities as well, we're limited in fully incorporating those into our analysis. We hope that this pamphlet will inspire people elsewhere-in Toxteth, St.Paul's, Handsworth, Moss Side, etc.-to publicise their experiences as well.

Riot Not To Work Collective,
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