

Britain: Oldham riots sparked by deliberate cultivation of racism

By Chris Marsden
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Last weekend saw two nights of rioting and fighting between Asian youths and police in Oldham, near Manchester. On Saturday, around 500 young Asians, as well as hundreds of white youth, fought pitched battles with large numbers of riot police wearing body armour. The police described the rioting as "sheer carnage". It left 15 police officers and 10 civilians injured. Trouble flared after Asians had fought with white youth outside a fast food outlet. A group of racist white youths gathered together in response, and then attacked a number of shops, also throwing a brick through the window of a house where a pregnant Asian woman lived in the Glodwick area where many Asian immigrants have settled. The woman, Farida Azan, aged 23, was showered with glass and left in a state of shock.

Asian women and children were also attacked in the street. Asians subsequently attacked the Live and Let Live pub. After hitting customers as they drank in the bar, they later returned, hurling a petrol bomb through the window.

On Sunday night, petrol bombs were thrown and several buildings attacked. An Asian supermarket was set on fire and the offices of a local newspaper, the *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, were firebombed. The *Chronicle* has earned the enmity of many local Asians because of its allegedly biased reporting. A group of riot police narrowly escaped injury when a car drove at them. A pub in Oldham town centre, The Jolly Carter, was bombarded with bricks by up to 40 people. Around 30 white people chanted racist songs as they walked from pub to pub, before being dispersed by police. Seven white youths and five Asian youths were arrested.

The rioting in Oldham comes after weeks in which the area has been targeted for deliberate provocations by various fascist groups. But the groundwork for the neo-Nazis was prepared by many other related factors—endemic poverty and social deprivation, the endorsement of racist sentiments by both the Conservative and Labour parties, as well as the mass media, and the repressive actions and inflammatory statements of the police.

Oldham includes the third poorest council ward in the UK. Oldham's population of 219,000 includes around 24,600 of Asian ethnic origin—14,000 Pakistani, 9,000 Bangladeshi, and 1,600 Indians. The town is divided up into mainly white,

Pakistani and Bangladeshi areas.

Most Asian immigrants came to Britain to work as nightshift labour in the textile mills and in other poorly paid occupations. They were usually the first to be laid off when the mills closed. As a result of the urban deprivation that afflicts the area, along with continuing racial discrimination, unemployment is as high as 25 percent amongst Bangladeshis and 16 percent among Pakistanis. For young Asians it is even worse, with unemployment rates of 40 percent.

Under these circumstances, a build-up of social tensions must inevitably result, along with rising crime, drug abuse and other attendant social ills. But the match that ignited the simmering caldron was thrown in April this year.

On April 22, three Asian teenagers attacked 75-year-old D-Day veteran Walter Chamberlain while he walked home from a rugby match. The circumstances of the assault are still unclear. Police said they did not know whether this was an attempted robbery, since his wallet was not taken, but his metal thermos flask was missing. However, the Oldham police said the matter was being investigated as a possible racial assault.

Earlier that week, a group of Asian youth were said to have phoned a local radio station, warning that they were setting up "no-go areas for whites". Detective Chief Inspector Andy Brennan linked the attack on Chamberlain with this threat. He told the press that one of Chamberlain's assailants told him he was "not allowed in this part of town" because he was white.

The next day, the media led with banner headlines and two-page spreads reporting as fact that Asians had set up no-go areas for whites and were now imposing them.

It later emerged that Chamberlain did not report these words in his initial statement to the police. Chamberlain's son also denied that there had been a racial motive. He told ITN's *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*: "As a family, we don't think it was a race issue at all—it's an assault."

This did not sway the majority of the media, or the police from their course. Manchester Police Chief Superintendent Eric Hewitt had already issued a provocative statement claiming that "8 to 10" Asian youths were responsible for 60 percent of the 572 racist attacks recorded during the past year in Oldham. Hewitt is widely regarded as a racist by the Asian community, and many said they did not bother to inform the police of racial

assaults and incidents because they do not do anything about them.

Taking their cue from the hysteria surrounding the attack on Chamberlain and the press claims of "no-go areas", the fascist British National Party (BNP) announced immediately that it would be standing two candidates in the June 7 general election, in Oldham West and Royton, in defence of "ordinary white people." One candidate is BNP leader Nick Griffin, who since then has regularly been invited to discuss the issue of race relations and asylum seekers on TV and radio. The BNP advocates a halt to all refugee admissions and the repatriation of so-called "illegal immigrants".

The rival National Front announced their intention to hold two marches in Oldham in May. Home Secretary Jack Straw responded by banning all political marches in the area for three months, but hundreds of fascists have nevertheless descended upon Oldham during the past three weekends. On May 6, the police made 16 arrests—11 whites and five Asians—including many taking part in an anti-Nazi counter-demonstration.

The events in Oldham provide a glimpse of the ugly face of British politics, after four years of a Labour government. They must be understood as a manifestation of the social and racial tensions being fostered, and the way they are being deliberately channelled in a right wing direction.

The lives of millions of working people blighted by hardship and economic insecurity due to the pro-big business agenda followed by Labour and the Tories before them. To conceal their own responsibility for this, both parties have engaged in a fierce contest over which can demonstrate the greater degree of xenophobia towards asylum seekers—who are scapegoated for every imaginable social problem. Both parties routinely deny that measures to clampdown on asylum are racist, but the fascists know better. Playing the "race card" is being legitimised by the political establishment, thus enabling the neo-Nazis to exploit the constant identification of immigrants as a threat to "British jobs", competition for decent housing and a drain on education and health services.

The events in Oldham will not cause either Labour or the Tories to alter their course. On Sunday, Simon Hughes of the Liberal Democrats made a fairly mild warning that Tory party leader William Hague's anti-asylum seeker rhetoric had made local problems worse. "We must be very careful with our language and that's why some of us have been very critical of some of the language particularly William Hague and his colleagues have used over the last two years," he told GMTV.

The response from the Tories was predictably one of outrage, with shadow home secretary Ann Widdecombe calling Hughes's comments "disgraceful". More revealing, was the response of Labour's Home Secretary Jack Straw, who made a ringing defence of the Tories. He told the Jonathan Dimbleby programme, "We have all got a duty to moderate our language, but I do think it is impossible to argue, incredible to argue, that what happened in Oldham yesterday can be laid at the door of

William Hague. I don't think debate is helped by that, because I have seen time after time situations where people get involved in violence and they scabble around for any excuse to eschew their own responsibility."

The press joined in to back up Straw's rejection of any connection between anti-asylum seeker rhetoric and the events in Oldham.

The *Independent* called Hughes's remarks "nonsensical". The *Daily Mail* dubbed them part of a "Stalinist" campaign to stifle "open and honest" debate on asylum.

The main Tory daily, the *Telegraph*, insisted on continuing to discuss the "many tens of thousands of people slipping into this country under false pretences," and claimed "There is no evidence... that Saturday's unrest was significantly different from the yobbery that disfigures so many British towns at weekends."

Praising Straw, the *Telegraph* concluded, "Faced with mob violence, a politician's proper attitude is straightforward condemnation... Jack Straw, to his credit, has done precisely this, explicitly rejecting any connection with the asylum debate."

The very same day, however, former Conservative Party chairman Lord Tebbit made explicit the racism underlying attacks on the right to asylum. He said the lesson he drew from the Oldham riots was that "separate and distinct societies living in the same territory are always at risk of clashing... they have not got enough binding them together to avoid them creating themselves into tribal factions." The government's failure to deal with the asylum issue, he added, was "possibly storing up further problems like Oldham in the future".

Tebbit's remarks were virtually identical to those of the BNP leader Phil Edwards, who said "We are campaigning in Oldham to help resolve the frustrations caused by diverse communities living in too close proximity."

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