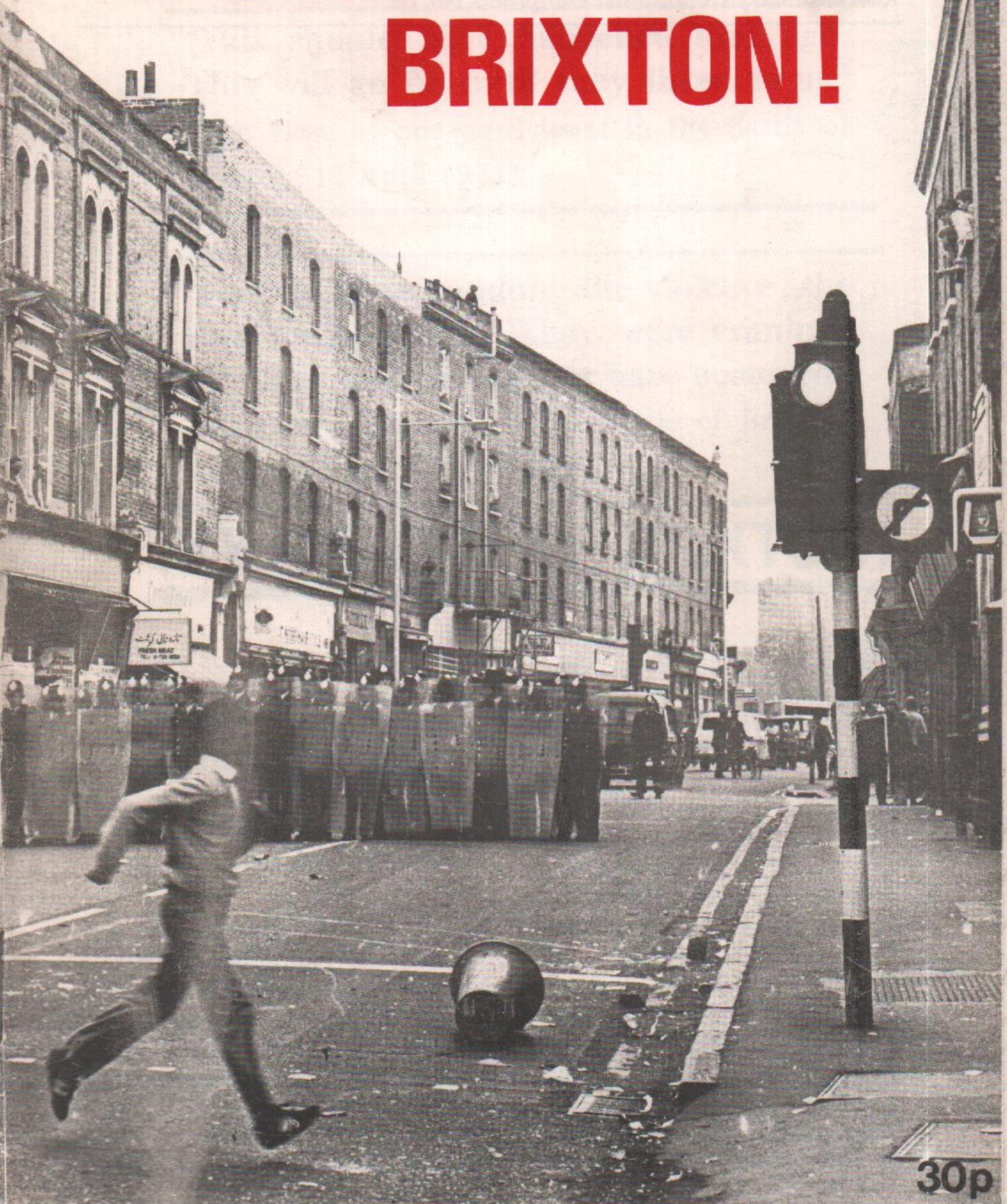


POLICE OUT OF BRIXTON!



30p

South London Workers Against Racism

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Revolutionary Communist Tendency

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**'This should have happened long ago.
This will go on until they listen to us.'**

(The view of one participant in the battle of
Brixton, 11 April 1981)

**'No one must condone the violence, the
disgraceful events. They were criminal,
criminal, and should not have occurred.'**

(Margaret Thatcher on the battle of Brixton,
Daily Express, 14 April 1981)

POLICE OUT OF BRIXTON!

The criminalisation of Brixton

It was ironic that in the same week that Irish freedom fighter and convicted 'terrorist' Bobby Sands was elected to Westminster the people of Brixton revolted against their oppressors. Both events were blows to the British state and its policy of portraying its opponents as criminals. In Ireland, British imperialism has attempted to isolate

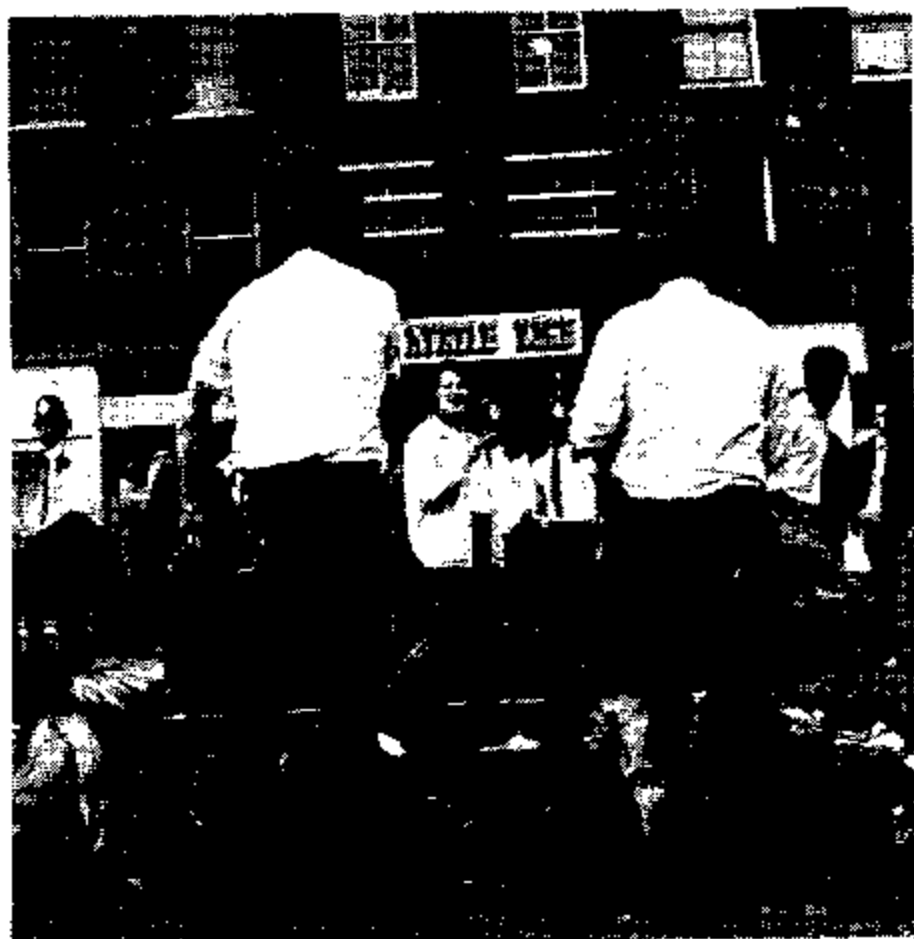
Irish freedom fighters by treating them as murderers and madmen. The massive support for Bobby Sands in the Fermanagh by-election showed that the Irish people repudiate this policy of criminalisation and approve of the struggle against British rule.

In Britain, racial oppression is an everyday fact of life. The government, the courts and the police treat black people as second class citizens. Many black people suffer unemployment, poor wages and conditions, bad housing and poverty. When young blacks express their hostility towards their oppression, they are labelled as criminals. But on Saturday 11 April the black people of

Brixton rose up — not like criminals — but as a movement of the oppressed against their oppressors.

'Operation Swamp'

The violence of racial oppression inevitably provokes the violence of the oppressed. The British state knows this and has organised special policing for black people. And to justify police harassment and intimidation of black youth the government's attack has been accompanied by a propaganda campaign. West Indian communities have been depicted as high crime areas — and West Indian youth have been the target of a vicious police campaign. The Home Office has commissioned academic inquiries as a back-up to police boots and truncheons: in 1979 one such 'objective' report noted that West Indians



Railton Road, afternoon of Friday 10 April 1981. Scores of police in uniform and plain clothes police who flooded the area.

had a 'propensity to engage in crime' (*The Guardian*, 4 December 1979).

The police explain their periodic invasions of Brixton as a consequence of the local 'crime wave'. Between 1975 and 1979 the Special Patrol Group (SPG) invaded Brixton on six occasions. In one operation in 1978 the SPG stopped more than 1000 people and detained 430. They were back in the summer of 1980, stepping up their intimidation of local people. In the weeks leading up to the Brixton revolt the police launched 'Operation Swamp': high intensity manoeuvres designed to drive black youth off the streets. Over a thousand people were stopped, searched and abused.

The revolt and after

Then Brixton erupted. Black youth took to the streets to kick out their oppressors. Within hours of the outbreak of the fighting the police lost control over the area. But the most significant feature of this resistance was that it was the police who were isolated. People of all ages cheered with delight as the police were forced to retreat down Mayall Road in a hail of missiles. The widespread support for the Front Line youth showed that criminalisation had worked no more in Brixton than in Ireland.

The response of the ruling class was predictable — more police repression. Newspaper articles raised the spectre of outside left-wing agitators, reporting that mysterious white cameramen were



The Front Line, Saturday afternoon

organising the street fighting. After a very brief tour of the area that provoked a very hostile response Home Secretary William Whitelaw commissioned an official inquiry into the collapse of 'law and order' in the area.

The local Labour Council this time did not call for an inquiry. It had organised one two years previously and had surprised nobody with its discovery that the 'condition of community/police relations in Lambeth is extremely grave' (*Final report of the working party into community/police relations in Lambeth, January 1981*). The council's solution was not to challenge the policy of criminalisation but to demand that the police show 'a greater respect for civil liberties'. The same approach guided their response

to street fighting in Brixton. They waffled about 'urban deprivation' and 'over-policing' and requested more funds for the community. Of course they could not support the 'riots' and expressed their regret at the 'unnecessary violence'.

For us there was nothing 'unnecessary' about the events in Brixton. For too long the issues have been confused by politicians, community relations experts and the media. In this pamphlet we look into the background of the battle of Brixton and examine the record of the labour movement. Workers throughout Britain should draw inspiration for their own struggles from the people of Brixton and fulfil their class obligation to support this movement of the oppressed.

Why Brixton?

Before the Second World War Brixton was a community of unskilled and semi-skilled workers employed in industry and services in other parts of London. Unlike East London, Brixton was not a traditional destination for immigrant settlers. A 1951 survey recorded only 400 West Indians in Brixton. But things changed in the 'fifties as British capitalism expanded, creating a shortage of labour. British capitalism sent its agents to the colonies to recruit workers: where British rule ensured poverty and high unemployment, the West Indies, was an ideal source of migrants. London Transport and the National Health Service brought thousands of West Indian workers over to Britain. The small West Indian communities — in Brixton and in other cities — grew steadily. Now one third of the people in Brixton are of West Indian extraction.

Immigrants were useful to British capitalism because they could be made to work for low wages, disposed of when they were no longer needed, and brought back into production when there was an economic upturn. From the very beginning black people in Brixton were made to feel like unwelcome guests, second-class citizens and a burden on the local community.

Black people were discriminated against right from the start. In housing a colour bar operated: landlords told

West Indians that they 'need not apply'. Overcrowding, damp and decay became the norm in black households in Brixton. And black people were blamed for the conditions created by discrimination in housing. In 1955 Lambeth Council began to complain of the burden that West Indians were throwing on housing facilities.

The Labour-controlled council had no intention of doing anything to alleviate the effects of discrimination in housing. One of the leaders of the local Labour Party Nartha Marock explained the council's attitude:

'Coloured families, even though some are living in miserable conditions will get no more housing priority than ordinary Lambeth people. If we put the immigrants into council property, then it must be to the detriment of the people of Lambeth who have been waiting for houses for many years.' (*South London Press*, 28 January 1955)

This response was characteristic: blacks were portrayed as competitors for the resources available to British people. Decent housing for blacks was represented as being 'to the detriment of the people of Lambeth'. So black people became responsible not only for the effects of their own oppression but also for the poor housing conditions of the local community.

Racism in all walks of life came to be justified on the grounds that black people were taking what was not rightfully theirs. The isolation of the West Indian community meant that employers could treat black workers as they liked, knowing that there would be no general

outcry at their low wages and appalling conditions.

When the British economy went into a short-lived slump in 1957 black workers were the first to be made redundant: in Brixton, black unemployment rose sharply. And, as a spokesman for the Brixton employment committee noted, discrimination intensified:

'Unemployment in Brixton is double what it was this time last year. This is bad enough but the worst part is that many coloured people are being turned down because of their colour.' (*South London Press*, 12 April 1957)

But racism was not the exclusive preserve of the employers. A job agency noted that 'employers do not want coloured people and if it's not the employers it's the unions' (*South London Press*, 29 January 1957).

By the late 'fifties the pattern of racial oppression that operates today had been fully established. Over the next 20 years the cumulative effects of oppression led to the hardening of racist attitudes, the further isolation of the black community and the build-up of social tension in the Brixton area.

Justifying police terror

As the screw of racism tightened, the state became more and more concerned with controlling the anger and frustration of its victims. And the police began to churn out their now familiar justifications for terrorising the black community. For 'cultural' reasons blacks had no respect for authority; they tended to be out of work because they were 'lazy'.

This is how one Police Chief Inspector justified a raid on a West Indian house where men were found playing cards at the height of the 1957-58 recession:

'When the police find a house of this description every endeavour must be made to suppress it. The majority of men are not working. Many have never worked while they have lived in this country and have money from various means.' (Quoted in *Race Today*, May/June 1980)



Social Segregation That Can Lead to Trouble. In most big towns coloured people live together in close communities. In such communities grievances are brooded on more bitterly.

From 'Picture Post', 2 July 1949. Britain's racist streets haven't changed in more than 30 years

Raids continued throughout the 'sixties. The Brixton police station became notorious for its 'nigger hunting' expeditions. One example of this intimidation took place when police stormed a West Indian home in Mostyn Road, Brixton in 1962. Despite police claims that alcohol was being sold in the house, the defendants were able to convince the magistrate that a family party had been taking place. But for every case like Mostyn Road, dozens of raids went unnoticed and many convictions went unreported.

Don't talk back

Any attempt to organise resistance met with the full power of the state. In 1969 for example a black activist was jailed for nine months for distributing 'inflammatory leaflets'. The local press reported:

'SCOTLAND YARD is keeping a watchful eye on the Black Power situation in Brixton and areas with immigrant concentrations where the movement is gaining strength because they fear that trouble could escalate within a few years.' (*South London Press*, 13 January 1970)

During the last decade police repression has intensified and racism has become a respectable political outlook. Rising unemployment and deteriorating living conditions resulting from the capitalist crisis are blamed on black people. The ruling class tries to keep social unrest at bay by calling on the nation to stand together against the threat of foreign competition, foreign imports — and 'foreigners', especially

'immigrants'. Black people have become scapegoats for the system. The present Nationality Bill proposed by the Government is the latest attempt to legalise discrimination and to strengthen the internal control of ethnic minorities.

The government has to enforce savage social and economic attacks on black people. There is no longer a labour shortage, and as far as the ruling class is concerned blacks are a dangerous nuisance. In Brixton thousands are looking for work in an area with one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. The harshest police discipline is essential to keep black youth under control.

A pig is a pig

Most criticisms of the police are entirely misplaced. The police are only the cutting edge of a system of oppression that extends throughout British society. It is not a question of 'over-policing' or the police 'overstepping' their powers or 'disregarding' civil liberties. The police's job is to maintain bourgeois law and order: in Brixton this means enforcing racial oppression by any means necessary.

Those who call for 'democratising' the police or for bringing it under 'community control' are simply calling for a more refined form of oppression. The police are not a neutral force that can be made accountable to workers. Their role is to defend the interests of the ruling class by controlling the anger of the oppressed. Behind the empty debate about reforming and democratising



'Left' Lambeth Labour councillor John Boyle gives a senior police officer some friendly advice.

oppression lies the real choice between the side of the state or the side of the oppressed.

The ruling class is not averse to refining its forms of oppression. It will set up consultative bodies, bring in community policing, recruit a few black policemen and fund a few community projects. All these measures are designed to cushion the blow of oppression and defuse unrest. The reformers are only playing into the hands of those who want to make racial oppression more acceptable and thus more effective. Take the example of Stockwell Park estate in Brixton. For more than two years a community policing scheme operated on the estate. The Communist

Party-dominated tenants' association strongly supported what it saw as an attempt 'to break down some of the hostility between police and public that undoubtedly exists in other parts of Lambeth' (*Morning Star*, 3 July 1980). In reality the regular patrols on the estate provided the police with a better knowledge of the area and more information on its residents. The community policemen were an *addition* not a substitute to the normal forms of policing. The value of the Stockwell Park experiment became clear in the days following the Brixton revolt. For three nights the estate was laid under siege as police with truncheons drawn and riot shields at the ready invaded, beat up residents and

review of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency

the next step

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Had enough?

Of the race relations industry, community policing,
non-racist immigration controls and anti-Nazi jamborees?

For too long racism has been ignored by the British working class. *the next step* redresses the balance by exposing racism where it really matters – in the heart of the labour movement. Every month *the next step* provides the arguments necessary for isolating racism in the workers' movement. More than that, it points the way forward – through the activities of the RCT and SOLWAR – to building the anti-racist struggle in Britain.



arrested 'suspicious' looking 10 year olds.

The ruling class cannot afford to relax police terror in Brixton. Intimidation will continue just as the oppressed will continue to fight back. Brixton erupted because the racist structure of British society gave people no other choice. There is no need for complex explanations: the question is whose side are you on?

Brixton and the labour movement

The British labour movement has done next to nothing to defend blacks against racist attacks. Indeed the leaders of the Labour Party and the trade unions have strongly supported the government in its dealings with the colonies and approved its immigration policies. Of course the Labour leaders are rarely explicitly racist; they often talk about the brotherhood of man and international solidarity. But their allegiance to the Union Jack has strengthened chauvinism in the labour movement and consolidated racial divisions in the working class.

The guilty party

The influence of Labourism in the workers' movement has undermined the anti-racist potential of the working class.

In Brixton and throughout South London many workers saw black people not as class brothers but as competitors for jobs, houses and services. The nationalist outlook of the trade unions prevented them from fighting racism. Even Lambeth Trades Council, one of the more militant union bodies in the area, ignored the discrimination that prevailed in Brixton and instead passed a resolution 'attacking the conditions in the West Indies which caused them to come to England' (*South London Press*, 23 March 1955).

The local labour movement 'attacked' conditions 2000 miles away rather than in its own back yard where it could have done something about them. But while their hypocrisy was bad enough, the way the unions themselves discriminated against black workers was even worse. Throughout the 'fifties the unions operated an informal colour bar in a number of trades.

The burden of guilt however rests with the Labour Party. The Labour Party has ruled Lambeth for most of the post-war period. Most of the time the party leadership has denied the existence of racial discrimination in the area. When the council was accused of operating a colour bar the Labour leader of the council replied: 'This Council has never, and I hope never will, operate a colour bar' (*South London Press*, 25 February 1955). Not only did the Labour Party ignore racial oppression, it also pointed the finger at black people. Instead of fighting racism the Labour council denounced the unplanned character of immigration. In 1955 a delegation led



Off to the Cash-and-Carry, Saturday afternoon

by local Labour MP Marcus Lipton pleaded with the Colonial Secretary to control immigration and to relieve the burden on Brixton and surrounding areas.

Labour's anti-racism consisted of turning a blind eye on discrimination and urging the government to keep 'them' out. It never challenged the assumption that blacks were the problem, hoping if their numbers were kept down the problem would go away. Over the last 20 years one Labour government after another denounced the evils of racism only to tighten immigration controls further still. Indeed the Nationality Bill now under consideration in Parliament was drafted under the last Labour Government.

No wonder black people in Brixton have no confidence in the official labour movement! For 30 years the labour movement has tolerated racial discrimination within its own ranks and has ignored the harassment and intimidation of the black community.

Our problem

It is necessary to expose the record of the official labour movement because racism is a problem for the whole working class. For black workers racial oppression means degradation, insecurity and second class status. For white workers acquiescence to racism means accepting their subordination to the attitudes

and policies of the ruling class.

Racism in the labour movement means that white workers identify more with their white employers than with their fellow black workers. The ruling class is happy with a state of affairs where racial divisions obliterate the division that really counts, that between workers and bosses. That's why they always go on about the 'national interest' and the threat of 'foreign competition'. In this way employers can mobilise workers behind their struggle to survive in face of overseas competition. They can win acceptance of wage cuts and redundancies on the grounds that 'our' industry is under attack.

One of the best ways to overcome the chauvinist outlook of the official labour movement that paralyses the working class is to fight racism in the labour movement. Workers who come out in support of the people of Brixton are not doing black people a favour — they are simply acting in their own class interests. In fighting racism workers can free themselves of the ideological bond that ties them to the ruling class. The anti-racist struggle strengthens the ability of workers to fight for their *independent* interests. It clarifies that the 'us' and 'them' does not mean white and black but workers and bosses.

Workers who tolerate the oppression of black people can never themselves be free. Indeed workers can never act as a class until they defend those who are oppressed. This is why the anti-racist struggle has such significance for the working class movement. In Brixton the battle lines are drawn. Workers who line

up with the oppressed are lining up against the state and its whole apparatus of repression.

Racial oppression in Brixton cannot be fought without challenging the right of the state to police the area, or without challenging the entire framework of legal controls and the immigration legislation on which they are based.

Workers will learn important lessons in fighting the state over Brixton. Today every time workers choose to fight for their rights they face not only their own employer but behind him the concentrated power of the state. To resolve the capitalist crisis at the expense of the working class the state intervenes in every important struggle to organise scabbing, control the unemployed and restrict trade union activity. Workers who allow the state to have its way in Brixton will be defeated when their turn comes.

For workers' defence

What is true for the police applies also to the courts, Parliament and every other state institution. No agency of the state can be relied on to fight racism because the state is the administrator of racial oppression; its institutions cannot be reformed, they have to be fought and destroyed. This is particularly true in the case of Brixton, where the government has poured in resources to tighten its control over the community. The authorities are realistic — they know that 11 April was not the end and that resistance to oppression can only increase. In the coming months the state will use a familiar two-pronged approach.

Whitelaw will promise inquiries, concede a few meagre reforms, make speeches about the virtues of community relations and buy off a few local 'community leaders'. At the same time the police will be instructed to tighten up repression. More sophisticated methods of surveillance and riot control can be expected to appear alongside the traditional brutal techniques.

Workers must aim to undermine the effectiveness of repression. We have to organise on the streets and housing estates to keep the police out. Steps



Home Secretary William Whitelaw on 'fact-finding' tour, Sunday afternoon. Behind him is Timothy Raison, Minister of State at the Home Office and the man responsible for the enforcement of all Britain's Immigration controls

must be taken to establish a network of activists who can carry this work out. At the same time legal defence and medical aid have to be arranged. The more organised the community the less effective is police repression.

Of course the state cannot be defeated in one borough alone. As long as Brixton is isolated the ruling class can concentrate its power against the community. This is where working class defence is so vital: financial support is the first step, but money is not enough. Workers must organise active physical support.

The Labour Party and their allies will warn 'do not take the law into your own hands, we cannot condone violence'. Already Lambeth Council has tried to reduce the issue to one of raising funds for the 'deprived'. But the problem is not urban deprivation. Working class families throughout the country suffer from poverty. In Brixton the issue is the violence of the oppressor.

Those who condemn the violence of the Brixton revolt acquiesce to the violence meted out to the people in the area every day. Labour leaders who condemn violence condemn every effective step taken by the working class. Workers face the violence from scabs and police on every picket line. No group of workers ever won a strike by turning the other cheek. To fight racial oppression workers must be prepared to counter the violence of the oppressor.

Many anti-racists will talk about the need for black and white to unite. But unity cannot be declared. Unity can only come about through white workers showing their commitment to fighting

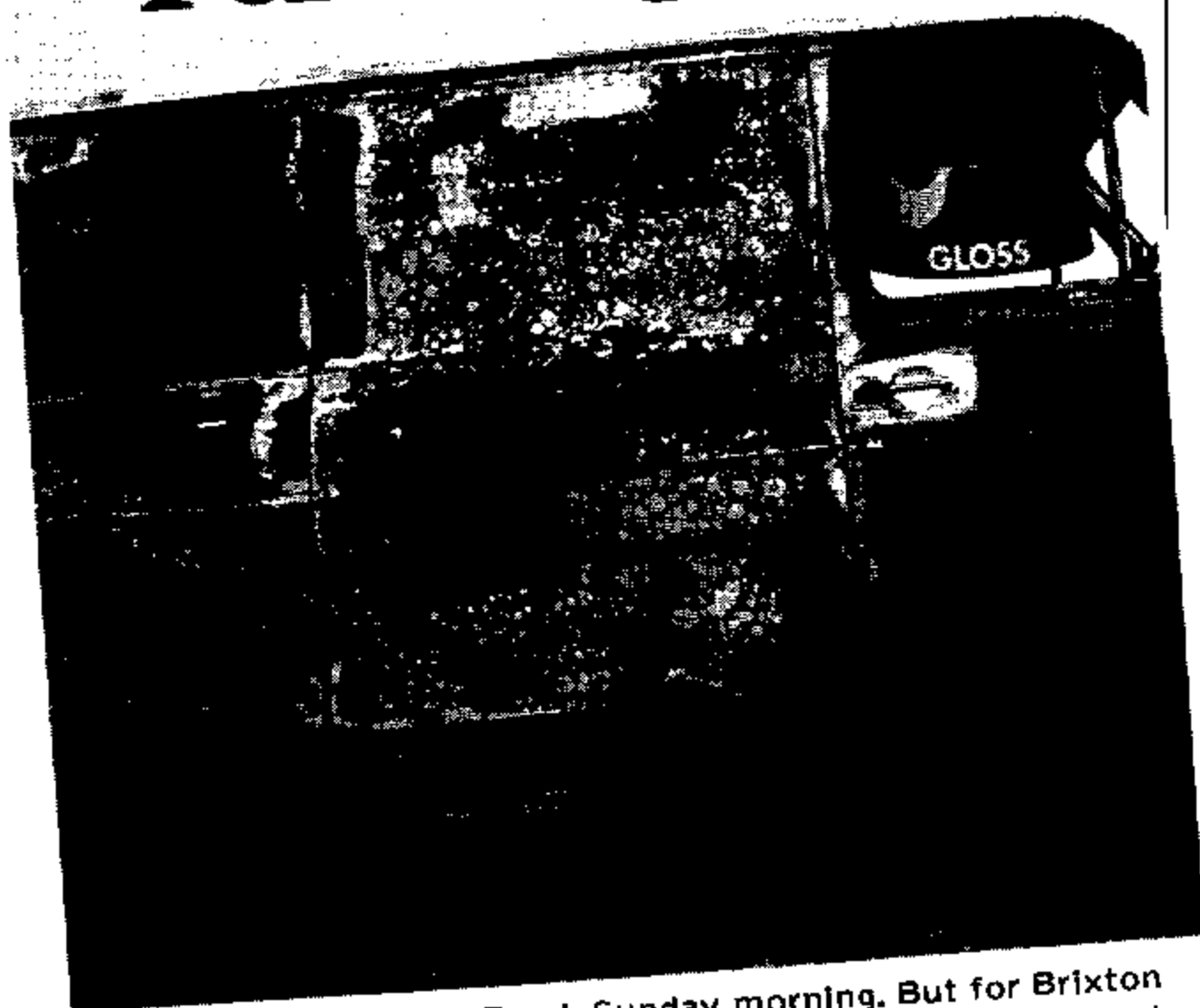
racial oppression. That's why organising workers' defence is so important, as a means to develop the political outlook of white workers and reduce the isolation of the black community.

The ruling class has every reason to fear violence in Brixton because the people there have shown their contempt for bourgeois law and order. For workers Brixton should be a cause for celebration and a signal that it is time they stood up for themselves against racial oppression and the British state.

Pat Roberts
Christina Drury

That's it

For a long time



Burnt-out van, Rallton Road, Sunday morning. But for Brixton that isn't it. The police will be back — unless we drive them out

South London Workers Against Racism

SOLWAR is ready to fight against racist attacks be they from the police or fascist thugs. We take our inspiration from the successful defence work of East London Workers Against Racism (ELWAR). During the past year ELWAR has fought back against the racists. It has organised defence patrols, legal defence and local labour movement support for victims of racist attacks.

In South London we have organised a campaign of defence for victims of the police and the courts. Our aim is to develop this work towards establishing community defence of the streets and housing estates. We seek in particular to mobilise trade union solidarity for the victims of racist oppression in South London.

Join SOLWAR!

Name.....

Address.....

.....

Telephone no

Trade union/organisation

£1 (individuals), £5 (organisations); make cheques/postal orders payable to SOLWAR

Send to SOLWAR, c/o BM RCT, London WC1N 3XX.

CUT





As the state steps up its repression an ever increasing amount of money is spent on new counter-insurgency weapons. Racist attacks by the courts, police and racist thugs are on the rise. To fight back costs money. SOLWAR needs £2000 to organise effective legal and political defence of victims of racist attacks. Rush us a donation now! Make cheques and postal orders payable to SOLWAR and send c/o BM RCT, London WC1N 3XX.

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