



What would a revolutionary organisation have done?

August uprising of the poor, the nationally and racially oppressed in Britain

By Michael Pröbsting, *Revolutionary Communist Organisation for Liberation* (RKOB), 18.8.2011

The uprising of the poor, of the black and migrant people in Britain between the 6th and the 10th of August was a “historic moment” in the country’s history as the black civil right activist Darcus Howe and a number of other people have accurately put it. It was a “historic moment” which ended up in defeat. Why? Because the existing leadership of the workers movement and the oppressed communities betrayed the struggle, left it alone and in most cases denounced it. The most urgent task in the coming period is to build a new revolutionary party which can give future uprisings a perspective to win and to build a socialist society.

Our organisation, the *Revolutionary Communist Organisation for Liberation* (RKOB), has explained its analysis and perspectives for the uprising in the statement from 10th of August (“*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!*”, <http://www.rkob.net/new-english-language-site-1/uprising-of-the-poor-in-britain/>) Based in Austria, the RKOB sent a delegation to Britain to follow the events on the ground, get involved with the activists and get a better understanding of the situation and the tasks following from it. Given the complete failure of the left in Britain to intervene in the uprising and to take a revolutionary position we will elaborate in this statement concretely what in our opinion a revolutionary organisation should have done in this situation.

1. This uprising is often wrongly characterised only as “riots”. This makes it easier for the Tory government and the bureaucrats in the workers movement to criminalise this uprising, to declare that looting was its main focus. A revolutionary organisation in Britain would have said from the beginning that this uprising is in its essence a spontaneous rebellion of the lower strata of the working class and of the racially and nationally oppressed minorities against the police repression and the poverty of the capitalist system. It would have declared that these so called “riots” *are in essence a form of class struggle*. Of course a form of class struggle with all its weaknesses, its raw and unorganised features, but a form of justified and progressive class struggle nevertheless. It would have explained that while certainly criminal acts happened in the context of the uprising this was in no way its essential character. It would therefore have sharply denounced all those non-revolutionary forces who associate this uprising with the “*lumpenproletariat*”, who slander it as “*cancer*” (e.g. IMT/Socialist Appeal), who “*is appalled at the current rioting*” and reject the uprising as “*only damaging for the communities in which working-class people live*” (CWI/Socialist Party) or who are vague about the motivation of this uprising (“*Some are motivated by hatred of the police and rage at this society – others by the promise of raiding local shops for goods – some by both.*”, LFI/Workers Power)

2. Recognising the character of the uprising as a form of class struggle of the lower and oppressed strata of the working class, a revolutionary organisation would have immediately after the beginning of this spontaneous rebellion *issued a public call to support and join the uprising*. It would have criticised all those reformist and centrist forces which restrict themselves to merely explain why the poor and oppressed take the streets, to explain why this is understandable or who only call for abstract solidarity without raising a finger for practical participation and support for the uprising. A revolutionary organisation would have worked on the basis of the Marxist approach of the founder of the Fourth International, Leo Trotsky, when he explained the abyss which divides Bolshevism and centrism (taking the example of the German centrist Ledebour) in their attitude to the struggle of the oppressed:

„Nevertheless, Ledebour's position even on this question does not leave the precincts of centrism. Ledebour demands that a battle be waged against colonial oppression; he is ready to vote in parliament against colonial credits; he is ready to take upon himself a fearless defense of the victims of a crushed colonial insurrection. But Ledebour will not participate in preparing a colonial insurrection. Such work he considers putschism, adventurism, Bolshevism. And therein is the whole gist of the matter.

What characterizes Bolshevism on the national question is that in its attitude toward oppressed nations, even the most backward, it considers them not only the object but also the subject of politics. Bolshevism does not confine itself to recognizing their "right" to self-determination and to parliamentary protests against the trampling upon of this right. Bolshevism penetrates into the midst of the oppressed nations; it raises them up against their oppressors; it ties up their struggle with the struggle of the proletariat in capitalist countries; it instructs the oppressed Chinese, Hindus, or Arabs in the art of insurrection and it assumes full responsibility for this work in the face of civilized executioners. Here only does Bolshevism begin, that is, revolutionary Marxism in action. Everything that does not step over this boundary remains centrism.” (Leon Trotsky: What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat, 1932)

3. As a consequence a revolutionary organisation would not have only called to join the uprising but would have *mobilised its members and supporters as much as possible to actually go to the areas of the struggle (Tottenham, Brixton etc.) and to play an active role in the resistance against the police*. It would have denounced all those who speak only about solidarity in words but in practise don't join the class struggle as it is - typical for centrist cowards and windbags. At the same time it would also have sent its supporters to other working class areas not yet affected by the uprising to call for solidarity, to counter the bourgeois lies against the riots etc. It would have sent delegations to trade unions, to the various organisations of the workers movement to urge them to join the struggle, to organise solidarity actions etc. – in short to call for a united front campaign.

4. A revolutionary organisation would have intervened by disseminating revolutionary ideas to help raise the activist's consciousness from spontaneous outrage and hatred against the system to a political class consciousness. For this it would have distributed leaflet and made agitation and propaganda for the central tasks. Revolutionaries would not have called only for the "right of self-defence" but would have called for building organised *workers and oppressed self-defence units now*. It would have called for the organisations of the labour movement to come and help build these self-defence organisations. It would have called for *councils of action, i.e. mass assemblies in the communities*, to discuss the most urgent tasks and elect delegates to coordinate and build a movement of the workers and oppressed. It would have called for spreading the struggle nation-wide by *calling the workers movement to join and link the struggle against the police repression and poverty with the movement against the cuts*. The perspective would have been a *general strike* against the cuts, against racism and for the overthrow of the Tory government.

5. A revolutionary organisation would have tried to organise the resistance to drive out the police and to stop acts of vandalism. It would have explained that looting is no solution. It would have argued that the task of *workers and oppressed self-defence units* is to prevent acts of vandalism, of looting small shops etc.

6. A revolutionary organisation would have issued public appeals for the organisation and the activists of the workers movement to come to Tottenham, Brixton, Birmingham etc and to help organising the struggle. It would have applied the united front tactic to spread the struggle, to organise solidarity, to call for the defence against the police repression.

7. A revolutionary organisation would have called to spread the struggle and to link it with the perspective of struggle against cuts etc and for a general strike. Not at some time later when the bureaucrats might be ready to prepare and build another of their impotent one-day actions but in the concrete situation of the uprising. To call for a link with the struggle against the cuts not at the same time while the riots take place but one, two or three months later (as the IST/SWP, CWI/SP, IMT/SA, LFI/WP etc. did) is a *schematic, passive, non-revolutionary approach* to an explosive situation of class struggle. It is a refusal to understand the revolutionary dynamic of the class struggle and the call for the activist of the uprising to subordinate to the plans of the labour bureaucrats and their one-day actions.

8. Today after the defeat of the uprising two things are urgent. First, to organise a broad defence campaign against the police repression. Secondly, to draw the lessons, to spread these lessons amongst the activists and to organise the most militant and politically conscious amongst lower strata of the proletariat, the migrants and the black community in a revolutionary, Bolshevik force.

9. Organising a *broad defence campaign* means to call for a united front of the organisations of the labour movement and the migrant and black communities. Demands must be raised for an independent inquiry of the police murder of Mark Duggan by the workers movement and the migrant and black communities. Release of all those arrested in connection with the uprising, no criminal prosecution, no cuts in the social and communal services! Down with the "stop and search" operations of the police! Build for an indefinite general strike against the cuts, against police repression and to bring down the Tory government! The police and state forces will not behave better in the future – build *workers and oppressed self-defence units*! For a *working class government based on councils of action of the workers, black and migrant communities*!

10. At the same time it is essential to understand the central lessons of the uprising and to spread them. The most important lesson is to recognise the *huge crisis of leadership of the working class and the oppressed*. The uprising of the poor, the black and the migrant people was completely spontaneous and lacked the involvement of any organised structures. It was unorganised because the organised workers movement and the established community leaders betrayed the struggle. They betrayed it by refusing any participation and in most cases even denounced the uprising. The trade union leadership calls only for limited and belated one-day actions. The reformist and centrist left adapted to the bureaucracy and didn't participate itself in the uprising. It prefers to leave the poor and oppressed alone instead of acting alone and independent of the bureaucracy in the uprising.

11. Understanding the lessons of the August uprising means also to recognise the *isolation of the British left and labour movement from the poor and the nationally and racially oppressed*. This is not an unexpected situation but the expression of the many decades long isolation of workers movement and the left from these masses of the middle and lower strata of the proletariat. Unfortunately their structures and influential forces are dominated by the middle class and the labour aristocracy. The ignorance of the uprising by this reformist and centrist left is therefore not an accident but the result of their aristocratism. It is now high time to understand the danger of this and the need to overcome this as soon as possible. One step to overcome this was to join the ranks of the struggle of the oppressed. But who has done this? Building the revolutionary organisation in Britain in the coming period is impossible without learning these lessons and recognising the historic failure of the reformist and centrist left in the past.

12. A small revolutionary organisation would most likely not have made a difference to the outcome of the uprising. An organisation of one, two or five dozen activists is under normal circumstances too small to decide the fate of an uprising of the masses. But it could have made a major step in gaining experience, spreading revolutionary ideas and organising activists from the oppressed communities and also made steps in building roots in the community. It is highly urgent to correct the mistakes of the past and build a truly revolutionary, Bolshevik organisation in Britain now. The *Revolutionary Communist Organisation for Liberation* (RKOB) wants to collaborate with all those who share such an outlook.