Harehills & The Roma-led Uprising in England

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Introduction

After 14 years of intensifying far-right Tory government attacks on the poor and rising racism by the government and state, on the 18th of July the Roma community of Harehills area of Leeds conducted a protest and uprising against the police and authorities over the forced removal of four Roma children between the ages of 7 and 14 from their family home. Police forcibly dragged the children resisting and crying into a marked police van in front of many the children's family and Roma residents. The depth of anger was clear on the streets as police struggled to deal with hundreds of very angry people who attacked the police using stones and bottles etc and burned down a local bus and set-up burning barricades. Police several times had to retreat from the resistance, indicating that it was one of the most intense outbreaks of resistance against the state seen in years.

Instances of non-white people in Leeds rising-up against police brutality and racism has happened at least five times since 1981. However, the root causes that trigger these social reactions from the poor and oppressed have not gone away but continue to intensify as we see the continuing rise of the far-right linked to the growing global crises of colonial-capitalism which seeks growing fascist measures to ensure its monopoly of power and pursuit of super-profits by means of increasing immiseration and division of working-class people.

The Roma are one of the most oppressed racialised groups of people in Europe and beyond. The Roma in Harehills are mostly from Romania (the terms 'Roma' and 'Romania' are not interchangeable and denote different identities, but one can be a Roma from Romania), but Roma are a dispersed oppressed group scattered across mostly West Asia, Europe and North America, especially the USA. Ignorance or wilful

ignorance towards the Roma in Harehills has meant right-wing and far-right forces (but also some in the Muslim community inadvertently or deliberately platforming far-right figures) have been able to exacerbate the instrumentalisation of the Roma community to advance their narrow agendas.

The Roma uprising in Harehills came about less than two weeks into a Labour government led by the new Prime Minister Kier Starmer, after 14 years of growing far-right politics and culture by Tory governments, not least the formalisation of far-right politics into the British state with the Brexit victory in June 2016 which launched new offensives on oppressed working class people including the 'hostile environment policy' push that saw the targeting of different migrant communities including the Windrush scandal, the Rwanda expulsion policy, the Bibby Stockholm barge, the scapegoating of migrants in temporary accommodation including hotels and the weaponisation of crossings over of migrants on small boats in the English Channel.

The Roma uprising in Harehills pointed towards a potential strength of united oppressed working-class struggle for collective rights and demands, but the impact of growing far-right culture in Britain has meant that oppressed communities have divided and demobilised. At the same time this is a constructed situation in relation to an organised and insurgent racist community seeking to 'get Brexit done', a challenge that was presented to them by the Tories and other far-right leaders such as Nigel Farage that 'getting Brexit done' meant basically the total expulsion of those deemed to be non-white in Britain. Instead, British mass racism saw more Africans and Asians arriving as some East European people left, with organised and British-state and media feeding this racist scapegoating and division.

By the end of July the mass racist British mob had been whipped-up in its hysteria to such an extent that a five-day race-riot of racist mobs broke out across mostly northern England: targeting families in their homes; attacking mosques; storming or attempting to burn down at least two hotels housing asylum seekers[1]; and attacking non-white people as they travelled in their cars. The Roma-led Harehills uprising was central to the most recent incidents that were then manipulated by racists that culminated in the pogrom-style racist attacks at the end of July.

Histories of Uprisings in Leeds

Leeds is a major town in the north of England in the county of Yorkshire. Like many other similar places of former industrial production and factories, it saw the decline of the industrial base which was speeded up as new and larger numbers of people from the global south diaspora were invited here by the British state to service the post-war economy from the late 1950s onwards. Migrants from the former British colonies were brought here to do the jobs that British workers were reluctant to do. Experiencing institutional racism at all levels of society – in education, policing, local authorities and so on – Caribbean and Asian heritage and other African and Asian working class youth became radicalised and conducted their first uprising against their conditions on November 5th 1975 in Chapeltown, a working class area most known for its residents of Caribbean heritage. The resistance was targeted intensely at police, with Caribbean youth being mobilised and inspired by the global surge against racism and colonialism and in its specific inspiration towards resistance and justice by anti-colonial Rastafarianism (a form of Pan-Africanism) and related Reggae.

Again, in July 1981 Caribbean working class youth led another bout of resistance in Chapeltown, which was at a similar time between 1979-1981 when African, Caribbean and South Asian youth were rising up in a dozen urban centres across England and resisting their conditions of growing poverty and racism. There was another clash in Chapeltown in June 1987 after 17 year-old Marcus Skellington suffered racist police brutality, followed by days of resistance. Then on 10th of July 1995, after several heavy-handed police raids on homes, the deprived, mixed Caribbean and South Asian area of Hyde Park saw another uprising by local youth. On 5 June 2001, South Asian, mostly Muslim youth rose up against the police and with violent protests against, once again, police brutality. On this occasion, South Asian Muslim youth felt that the time to stand-up for themselves had arrived, as similar resistance was being conducted by their counterparts in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley that summer. In addition to racist police brutality, poor housing and poverty they also faced the added pressure of rising racism amongst the white English community who in the period of 1993 until 2018, voted in scores of councillors from the far-right racist and Neo-Nazi British Nationalist Party. For the next near quarter of a century, all these problems of growing fragmentation and alienation of non-white people, increasing racist hostility from the British state and population and rising poverty, continued apace. The Roma community in Harehills are subjected to the same racist oppression that Caribbean, African and Asian communities suffer, but with perhaps even more institutional and mass prejudice against this little understood community.

Who are the Roma?

The Roma, sometimes referred to as 'Romany'/'Romani', are widely understood to be a people who originate from present-day North India and Pakistan (Pakistan is a state formed in 1947). They are said to be possibly from the regions of Rajasthan, Kashmir and Sindh provinces. Research suggests they migrated out of India westwards from around the 10th century, with perhaps this migration starting earlier. They retain a considerable amount of the Indic influence in Romany languages (particularly Gujarati, Punjabi and Rajasthani) and the cultural beliefs of many retain elements of Hinduism. In European settings, they are often either Christian or Muslim by confession and have been for many centuries. Since their arrival in European countries they have been treated as outsiders, sometimes their experiences are compared to the oppression of Jews historically in Europe. Roma often look visibly as outsiders in whiteness as they are non-white, although in the UK census of 2011 the category of 'Roma' was added for the first time but in a sub-category under the "white" ethnic group.

The fact that the British state decided to give the only option to Roma respondents to identify themselves under a "white" category is typically manipulative of the British state's colonial approach. Many Roma are clearly not visibly 'white', and also they are treated as a non-white group, ie., outside of whiteness in their overwhelmingly racist treatment. The British state has for a long time, and especially since the Second World War tried to co-opt sections of the Roma community. Obliging Roma to put themselves down as 'white' in the census will add to the British colonial divide and rule policy, in part to prevent the Roma from identifying with other non-white oppressed communities.

Looking back at their histories in Britain, it was in 1530 that the first laws expelling Roma from England were introduced under King Henry VIII. Often Roma people are termed as 'gypsies', something that is generally not accepted by Roma. In 1554 during the rule of Queen Mary, the English Parliament passed the first Egyptians Act which made meant anyone found to be a 'gypsy' could be punished by death. This legislation was not repealed until 1780. Other similar laws with a similarly genocidal framework also occurred in other European countries from the 16th century until 1945. In 1783 Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann developed so-called 'scientific racism' in relation to the Roma people. The 1800s saw a million East European Roma migrate to the USA. In 1899, the Bavarian police (now in present-day Germany) established the "Central Office for Fighting the Gypsy Plague" in Munich, which was a way of monitoring and oppressing the movements of the Roma people. The period of Nazi persecution and genocide saw somewhere between 500,000 and 1.5 million Roma lives being lost. From 1956 attempts were made by different states to forcibly settle the few remaining nomadic Roma.

With the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU), countries with sizeable Roma communities saw some of them migrate to Britain. These countries included: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU, a move which saw some Roma migrate from these two states to Britain.

In Leeds more than one in five residents live in poverty (176,376 people), while 31.3 percent of the city's children and young people (55,780 youngsters) live in poverty (above the national average of 29 percent). 38 percent of residents of Harehills and neighbouring Gipton described themselves in the most recent Census as being from Asian

backgrounds, 36 percent white and 17 percent black. Roma people live 10 years less on average than non-Roma, and experience more of the risk factors in and around mental health challenges. There are estimated to be over 5000 Roma people in Leeds, but there has been little information on the conditions of health and other life experiences. According to census analysis, almost 20% of Roma people live in the most deprived 10% of England (higher than the national average). One in three work in 'elementary' jobs, and nearly two in five adults report no educational qualifications at all. According to one study conducted in 2023 by Lancaster University, Anglia Ruskin University and Law for Life, Roma residents in Leeds struggle to understand government and other services due to the language barrier. The study found insufficient translators being available and Roma needing to use their children to translate for them. Some had difficulties accessing translators, and had been put under pressure to use family members to interpret. These were extra barriers to the support they needed.

As the Roma uprising in Harehills was triggered by racist behaviour of social services and police, the report from 2023 also focused on this aspect as data shows an increasing number of Roma children in the care system. While in 2009, there were around 30 Gypsy/Roma children who were 'looked after', by 2015 this had risen to 250. The figure stood at around 600 in 2023. The report stated that:

> "a lack of trust, based on historic discrimination, has damaged the relationship between Roma families and children's services in England … The research found that Roma communities tend to mistrust and fear authorities due to their experiences of historic persecution across Europe. It also found that social workers, when dealing with Roma children, frequently conflate the impacts of poverty with

neglect. The challenges faced by Roma families in their interactions with children's services are deeply rooted in experiences of historical discrimination, societal biases, and systemic failures in processes."

Co-author of the report Professor Margaret Greenfields, of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said:

"The trajectory of Roma history in Europe has included centuries of marginalisation and discrimination, including attempts at cultural annihilation involving the forced sterilisation of women and removal of children to the care of non-Roma families and placing of children in 'special schools'. For many Roma people, both in the UK and internationally, these experiences create an often well-grounded fear of authority."

Another report suggests addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach, including cultural sensitivity and competence training for professionals, "addressing discriminatory practices and combating wide-spread negative stereotypes, supporting the legal empowerment of Roma families, and conducting further research to understand and respond to the specific needs of the Roma community in the British context."

Can the System Cater to the interests of the Roma and Other Oppressed? Reform or Rebellion under Growing Racism?

For those who are seeking empowerment for the Roma and other oppressed communities by colonial states; for those who are seeking a society that is actually re-organised to serve the interests of the oppressed rather than the oppressors, it is important to primarily focus

our minds and conversations around the challenges or even possibilities of reforming a white supremacist colonial system and state. The debate over reforming the colonial system or smashing it and replacing it with an anti-colonial society is an old one that is most graphically illustrated in the popular mind between the reformist civil rights approach in the USA context in the 1960s of Dr Martin Luther King Jr and the more revolutionary approach of Malcolm X / Malik El-Hajj Shabazz and the 'daughters and sons of Malcolm X', the Black Panther Party/Black Liberation Army. A nuance here is that Dr King himself came over more to the position that the USA racist system could not be reformed. If we look rationally at the situation whereby working class oppressed people are being increasingly stripped of their political, cultural, social and economic rights and conditions, we can understand that the colonial-capitalist system is unable to provide for the oppressed, that its existence is predicated on the growing exploitation, oppression and monopolisation of power away from and against oppressed communities.

Both wings of the colonial system. – Democrat/Republican, Labour/Tory, liberal/right-wingers – are wings of the same system, and both wings feed the same system and the same global white supremacist global ruling classes. We have to be honest with our communities that there has been nothing but general deterioration on every level for them/us globally and in the 'colonial centre' in places like England for many decades, and more pressure and injury and death is being imposed by the system as we go forward.

In certain moments when the contradiction between the oppressed and the oppressor is magnified and results in a larger social reaction, we can see that the oppressed do act in these moments that they understand this perfectly, and that is what happened in the different

uprisings in Leeds including the one led by the Roma in Harehills on 18th July this year. The intensity of the resistance against the police in the uprising showed in direct action that the oppressed reject their treatment by this racist state, that there is no negotiation with the colonial state on the latter's terms but in this moment on the independent terms of the oppressed.

The state is directly and indirectly employing the far-right and extreme racist forces and frameworks to keep oppressed communities insecure, anxious and divided, and as such they are unable to really attempt to come together around what they have in common. A central part of this in the wake of the Roma uprising in Harehills was to state that the violent protest is just born out of some innate cultural or biological propensity to senseless violence. The racists and politics in general has for years tended towards a place where there is no 'seeking truth from facts' but the near total construction of all manner of lies and fabrications, untruths, manipulations and racist conspiracies which are believed by massive sections of society. This racist and far-right industry of lies and false conspiracies has also recruited a considerable section of non-white people, which is also one of the aims of these racist projects, especially if they are far-right racist in a 'civic nationalist' sense and not a racialist neo-Nazi type.

Nigel Farage is a leading politician in Britain, perhaps the most popular politician amongst Brits. He is also a leading racist. In response to the Harehills uprising Mr Farage asserted that "the politics of the subcontinent are currently playing out on the streets of Leeds". The Roma haven't resided in the Indian subcontinent for at least 1000 years. It was Nigel Farage who literally defined the mass meaning of Brexit as a mass influx of non-white immigrants to Britain in the now infamous Brexit poster. The point of this racism is to squeeze all non-white

people into one category of the dehumanised other and outsider who needs to be expelled to 'save' Britishness and Britain. Another leading racist and former far-right Tory MP, now far-right Reform Party MP Lee Anderson, conjured up yet more 'invasion to the land of milk and honey' fantasies stating:

> "import[ing] a third world culture and you get third world behaviour … I want my country back." The former Tory minister for immigration Robert Jenrick, victim-blamed the Roma for 'their' failure to integrate into a system that doesn't and can't 'integrate' them."

The Roma were framed by the far-right as Asians and especially as Asian Muslims, in line with their fear-mongering racist lies about Muslims and Islam that has been a mainstay of their messaging for decades if not generations. Roma have different religious beliefs. Some are Muslims, some are Christians. The Roma in Leeds tend to be mostly Christians. The potential and actual strengths of the oppressed has always been unity based on being oppressed under the white supremacist colonial system and not solely and narrowly around factions of tribe, region, religion and nationality. Some voices in the Muslim community, reacted to the far-right lies that the Roma involved in what was happening in Harehills were Muslims, by saying that actually the Roma are 'European and Christian'. Whilst this was obviously done to expose the inconsistency of far-right narratives, it also had the unintended consequence of implying 'Roma are actually part of your problematic camp of European Christians.' This perpetuates the exact colonially divisive framework that the racists use.

Local resident in Harehills and Green Party councillor Mothin Ali caught the attention of another leading far-right racist figure Stephen

Yaxley-Lennon, better known as Tommy Robinson, when at the conclusion of the election count for local council elections in May earlier this year, Ali stated that his victory was dedicated to the Palestinians and proclaimed 'Allahu Akbar' in his victory speech. The protests for Palestine have been used centrally by the state and the wider British racist community to heighten racist pressure on communities, especially Muslim communities. Ali's comments on Palestine and his open Islamic affiliation were piled on by Yaxley-Lennon and his supporters on social media. The Daily Mail, which has promoted all manner of British colonial filth for more than a century, chimed in, accusing Ali of "causing outrage" with his comments, when the real cause of outrage is racism being internalised across the British population. Ali explained his experience around this:

> *"It got really, really threatening after that. My phone started going off every few minutes, it was 'die [P-word], die' and 'I'm gonna kill you'. They started posting pictures of my kids and all that sort of thing. I shut my social media down. I deleted Twitter, I came off Facebook. I wasn't expecting it, I thought probably I'd get some criticism afterwards but I never thought it would be as crazy as it was. It was relentless, day after day. There was an incident where someone turned up at my house, someone let my tyres down, someone phoned the police and made a death threat and was asking about my security. It's just horrible, absolutely horrible. But people here know what I'm about."*

When the Roma uprising occurred, videos of Ali walking amongst the protestors were twisted into a lie by this far-right community wrongly claiming that Ali was engaged in stoking the violent protests. In fact, Ali was not inciting or rioting, but was trying to protect the police, and

stop people throwing bins and crates on the blazing barricades. He himself gathered water from nearby homes and was filmed hand-cupping water to throw onto the burning barricades. The metaphor here is very apt speaking to James Baldwin's 'The Fire Next Time' which spoke of the righteous violent resistance and uprisings of Black people. However, ironically it is Ali in this metaphor who is the one who wants to put out all the righteous fires of the oppressed that are beacons toward liberation and freedom.

Ali argued: "some of the police officers over the last few years I've got to know and I didn't want them to get hurt. I thought, this is what a councillor is supposed to do." Isn't protecting police officers that you like and are friendly with – from an institution that is proven to be institutionally rapist, racist and homophobic – something that a councillor is supposed to do? According to the colonialists and its system: yes. In the liberal and the reformist position borne out by the colonial state, advocating for the protection of the police and trying to make a racist system work for victims of racism is the only thing available to oppressed people.

Ali argues further:

> *"We need to be able to reach out to the communities, people who are quite isolated, bring them into the system, and say 'Look, this is the value of voting, this is the value of education, the schools aren't your enemies, the teachers are trying to help you.' Build that level of trust, because there is a massive level of distrust. And we've got to make sure they're welcomed into the system, not forced into the system."*

Who is the pronoun 'we' in these regards? It seems to be those who are trying to make the system 'work' alongside the system itself, but isn't a capitalist, white supremacist racist and colonial system doing what it is supposed to do in oppressing and exploiting? People have been voting, but every government, councillor and MP does not and cannot do anything for the poorest and most oppressed because the system makes it impossible, because the system is functioning as it is designed to function. With the growing insurgency of racist Britons, with the state and government folding into every rise in the level of fascism, everyone is being targeted for greater dehumanisation.

Whatever the best intentions of those trying to engage with the state, recent events have made clear in quick succession that the state and its institutions are the issue that requires change. Conformity from oppressed communities can no longer be seen as a solution to their problems. As Malcolm X explains, only total separation away from the colonial system is the means by which oppressed communities can achieve anything for themselves collectively. The oppressed who have relatively little to lose 'in the fields' have to contend with the colonial buffer class 'in the house' that is in many ways the first line of protection of the oppressors. So what are the situations around the challenges of oppressed communities asserting their own rights in such a struggle for dignity and liberation as it relates to the situation of the Roma oppressed community and others?

Conclusion: Challenges of Unity & Struggle in Growing Coloniality

As is often the case in community uprisings of the colonised, and similar to the Roma-led uprising in Harehills what we see are other demographics of the colonised joining in the uprising and resistance in many ways. People from other colonised backgrounds who were not Roma joined in the uprising on 18th July. In Britain before the Brexit victory and especially after it, Brexit (or "Empire 2.0" as it was known in the British civil service) was and is employed by the British state to ensure the division and taming of oppressed communities. This new Brexit order is meant to keep and has kept pushing racist divisions so colonised people don't reach-out and find the actual truth of their condition that uniting and struggling together against the entire racist system is in their immediate interests. In this context, are there any political realities and forces that exist in Britain that seek to unite and develop a political struggle in a united anti-colonial manner? The tragic but honest answer to this is no.

The examples of successful struggles that unite colonised communities in the context of a state in the 'West' are arguably those led in the late 1960s by the Black Panther Party such as the Chicago-based 'Rainbow Coalition' and the BPP's initiative of things like the United Front Against Fascism conference organised by the Black Panther Party and held in Oakland, California, from July 18th to 21st 1969. The BPP had hundreds of African ('-American') people organised into an efficient community and self-defence struggle drawing in hundreds of thousands of others and people from other racialised communities including Native Americans, Asians, and those in the white community who rejected white supremacy and colonialism. The challenge is to develop a program of engagement on council estates and high streets (as Leila Khaled has argued in her biography) to serve the people, love the

people, and become a part of them in a framework of radical anti-colonial grassroots self-organising. The uprising in Harehills and then community resistance (mostly by street organisations of young people or 'crews' etc) against the mob attacks a few weeks later showed that openings for uniting the oppressed come out regularly around once or twice a year. The problem is that there are people few and far between attempting to increase capacity at the grassroots towards developing the relationship-building required to articulate a new social movement of solidarity and resistance.

Going forward we still have a growing racist mass mob in Britain that seeks nothing but the mass expulsion of non-white people, something which the Tories directly stoked and fed with their Rwanda removal policy, Bibby Stockholm barge and attack on Windrush migrants from the Caribbean, as well as their demonising narratives around Muslims and migrants more generally. Calls for mass expulsion of our communities are growing in Britain. British PM Kier Starmer has insisted that sharp draconian sentences are passed on some of the racist mob which has slowed down some of the bigger organised racist attacks although smaller level racist attacks continue. At the same time the new Labour government has to be on the defensive as most Britons are demanding more racist policies and accusing Starmer of being 'two tier Kier' which is a popular far-right slogan that asserts that there is one standard of policing for non-white people and another more repressive one for white Britons. This is of course a totally fabricated nonsense, but what it means is that non-white communities will be seeing (even more) harsher policing.

This entire situation clearly indicates the growing exposure of the contradictions of the system. Thus far, the colonial state is effectively managing communities in a way that is resulting in further social

depression and fragmentation as the state and its non-state racists close in ever further around the proverbial neck of our communities. Examples of unity and resistance exist in the world today, not least in Palestine which sees a Palestinian people made up of people from different backgrounds united in a struggle against a white supremacist colonial settler entity. In the colonial centre we have also seen examples of this framework. Will we see new generations and forces pick up the challenges that lie in front of us?

[1] Protests outside such hotels by far-right groups have become frequent and normalised in recent years: according to The Guardian newspaper, in 2022 there 253 such 'visits' by the far-right to hotels accommodating asylum seekers, twice as many as the year before.

Mischaracterisation and misrepresentation of the Roma community by the state has crept into the thinking of all marginalised groups, argues Dedan Kemaathi. As a result, the July unrest and protests in Leeds have been misunderstood and a chance for unity against the racist state lost.