

# WE WANT TO RIOT

Look at the man on the right—is he asking the way to the Labour Exchange? Were the thousands involved in the uprisings asking for jobs?

Look at the picture below. What are they holding in their hands—petitions, classified job ads, the *Morning Star*, letters to MPs, Labour Party membership forms?

The uprisings were a step in the right direction. Not only did people refuse their everyday boredom, hardship and repression, but they also had a fucking good time!

Since then we've seen the 'Peoples March For Jobs', designed—like the Right To Work Campaign—to cash in on discontent while trying to reduce us to begging from the system instead of overthrowing it.

So much for the left's fake 'anger', fake 'resistance', fake 'fun'. We need a new world.



# WORK

## THE 1981 BRIXTON UPRISINGS



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TORY EXPRESS

So,  
trendy teachers  
slack parents  
and lead poisoning  
were causing the riots  
are you kidding me?

And,  
the Front-line residents  
of Railton Road  
destroyed their own homes  
to discredit the police?  
Sure mate,  
Whatever you say you fuckwit.

PatRIOTism  
It's not a matter  
of why "they" rioted  
but why "you" did not?  
and which  
High streets  
and which areas  
will be next?

It's not youth  
or unemployment or  
immigration or even  
"alienation"  
like sniffin glue  
it's something to do

No-one is behind it  
or leading it  
the State only just  
outflanked it  
We all played apart in it  
and I'll never forget it  
I mean to say  
dull, it wasn't.

8.8.81

# **WE WANT TO RIOT, NOT TO WORK: THE 1981 BRIXTON UPRISINGS**

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Early evening, April 11: Police block off Railton Road at Mayall Road (but soon the uprising was to overcome them and spread out to the main Brixton shopping area).



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.

## I) '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 which 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 timespan 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 scrutinise relative unemployment statistics, we look at the newly emerging class composition which 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. Unemp-

loyment 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 which 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 ....?

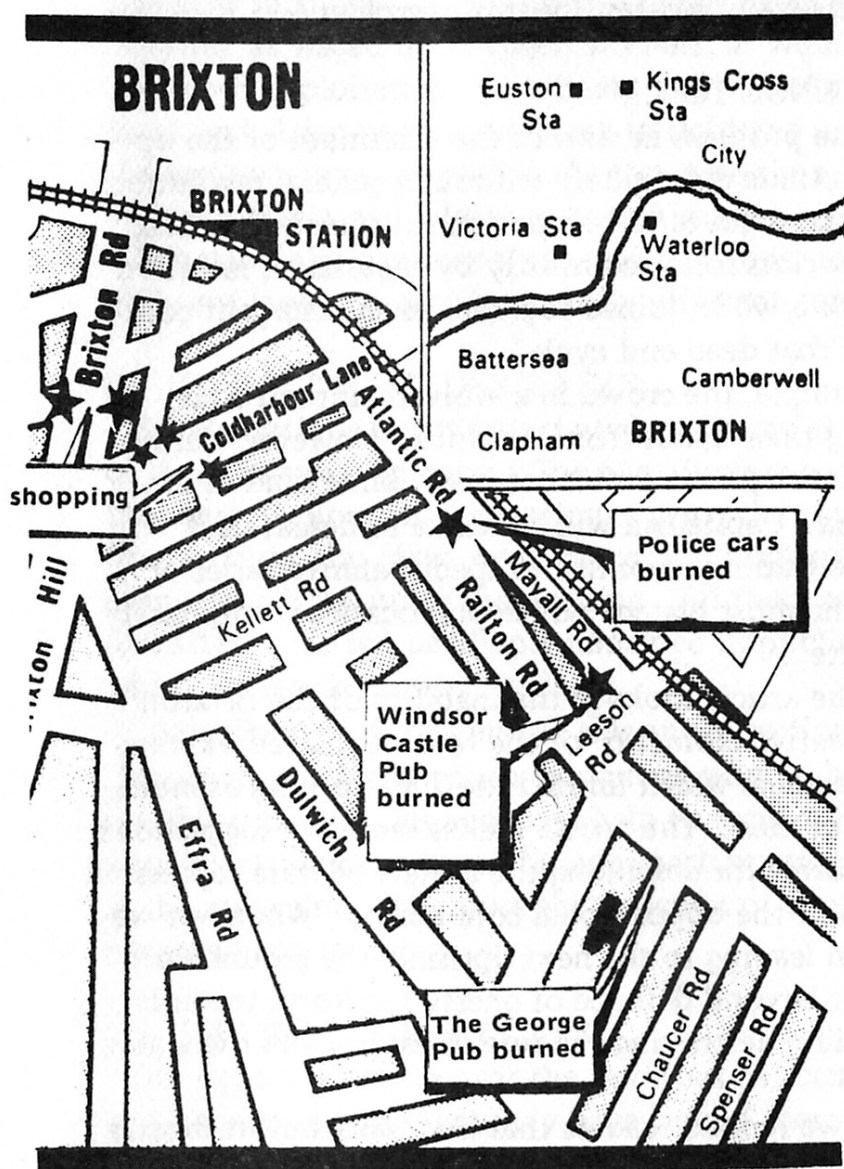
The third section approaches the problem in view of the aftermath of the uprisings. Although a riot can't continue indefinitely without a general revolutionary upheaval, it can nevertheless contribute to bringing about such a situation. However, so far we have seen our riots followed mostly by repression, 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 which 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 emphasises 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.

# 'IT WAS THE THING TO DO'



Another recent change in the local landscape:

The northern section of Mayall Road, which forms one side of 'THE TRIANGLE'—an integral part of the Frontline terrain—has, since February, been sealed off with corrugated iron by Lambeth Council. While this change is officially part of the redevelopment of the area, it also conveniently would give the police a strategic advantage in containing any future streetfighting in that immediate area.

## THE FIRE THIS TIME

By now the social and economic background to the Brixton riots will be familiar to most people. A housing waiting list, in the borough in which Brixton is situated, of 18,000; a third of the housing stock sub-standard; high unemployment with about 2 out of 3 of the unemployed being black; a high robbery rate (in fact the highest in London, it being twice the nearest figure); next to no social amenities.

This is all very true. The area around the Railton Road (Frontline/Mayall Road triangle) is inhabited by mainly black council tenants and mainly white squatters (leftists/anarchists/marginals). Empty houses are also used by local blacks as drinking and gambling clubs, dope centres and venues for all-night 'Blues' (parties with sound systems pumping out non-stop reggae). Down the Frontline a black crafts centre has recently started in one empty building and further down a former black bookshop is now a squatted anarchist bookshop. People down here tend to live on the left-overs of capitalist society. For years, the Triangle has been on the drawing board for demolition but only in the last two has any attempt been made to carry this out. But the council keep running out of money so it has been coming down piece-meal, making a rough area look even rougher. However, the maze of streets west of the Front-line look brighter as they have increasingly come under the occupation of white, liberal professionals and self-made respectable blacks.

Down the Frontline there are two distinct cultures — the black and the white — and it is the black culture which predominates and on the fringes of which the young whites participate. Dope and Reggae. The blacks have their own language — Patois — and this gives them an independent cultural identity that is not easily co-opted or diluted. Perhaps the most relevant aspect of this culture (in terms of the riots) is that it is very much a street culture (despite British weather). Winter or summer there are always crowds of blacks out on the Frontline rapping, smoking, laughing, visibly occupying their social space.

But it is the cops who claim they control the streets of London. Certainly in the two years I've lived on the Frontline I've noticed that the cops have always tried to intimidate the Frontline community with constant vehicle and foot patrols and less frequently, horse patrols. (The most bizarre policing incident I've ever seen happened a few months ago when a cop on horse-back chased someone down Mayall Road).

Actually, the cops know they cannot fully control the Frontline. Despite their claims and their patrols the police policy on the Frontline has been one of containment—periodic raids to remind locals who is boss and to warn them not to get out of hand. Operations such as the one in 1978, when the SPG sealed off the Frontline and searched anybody and everybody, have caused outrage. Blacks, especially the second generation, are, on the whole defiant. A month or so ago a black motorist tore up the ticket a cop had just given him and threw it back in his face, to cheers from the assembled crowd.



Muggers at work in Brixton

The cops constantly use the SUS laws to stop and search young blacks. And they do this with vengeance. Another events on the Frontline will illustrate this. Two vehicles collided and the cops on the scene immediately searched both vehicles and their drivers and passengers. The accident was secondary. With such everyday deprivation and such mindless state bullying, for being deprived, the one thing which united the disparate elements of the Frontline community is a burning hatred for the cops. What most surprised local people when the Bristol riots happened last year was that they hadn't happened here first. Another surprise was that the anarchist grafitti which went up after Bristol—'Bristol yesterday, Brixton today'—took a year to be made real. The establishment knew this too. Only a few months ago Lambeth Council published a report criticising the cops and predicting trouble.

### THE WEEK BEFORE THE RIOTS

The constant intense policing of Brixton and of the Frontline in particular was heightened in the week leading up to the riots. At 11pm on Friday April 3rd., the Frontline area around Dexter and Leeson Roads was sealed off by cops with no-one being allowed in or out for over an hour. Over 20 arrests were made. Then, in the following week, Operation Swamp 81 saw over 1,000 people (mainly young blacks) stopped and searched. This was all adding to the increasing frustration of local people. At about 2.30am on Friday 10th I was stopped and threatened by 3 young blacks with bottles. This confused and angered me (it was the first time I'd ever been hassled on the Frontline) and it was only later that I realised that they have been victims of 'Swamp 81', perhaps only minutes before meeting me.

On Friday 10th at about 5pm a young black with a knife wound was stopped on the Frontline by cops. What followed is the source of many different stories. Whatever happened (and it isn't necessary to seek justification for what followed anyway) the cops were attacked by a gang of locals, the young bloke freed and taken to hospital. A brief battle with cop re-inforcements occurred. The cops took this as a challenge and so the following day, Saturday 11th, the Frontline was under police occupation.

Usually the cops patrol the Frontline. But on that Saturday they parked up and down the Frontline every 50 yards, just sitting in their vans waiting for something to happen. It was a warm day so the Frontline was full of people standing around doing the usual things and, this time, eyeing the occupation force with hatred. All afternoon most people expected trouble of some sort. At about 5pm in the afternoon a plain-clothes cop received the free gift of a brick on the head for wanting to search a black guy's car. Up in Atlantic Road an arrest was attempted and this further angered an already angry crowd. Most of this crowd was gathered in the space at the apex itself and is at the beginning of Atlantic Road, The odd brick began to fly at the cops isolated in the crowd. A window was smashed. Tension rose.

Electric. Then plain-clothes cops appeared from the crowd and joined the uniformed lot. Battle lines were now clearly drawn and the first barrage of bricks flew in the direction of the cops. They threw a few back and charged. At first we retreated a little but—realising we were many, they were few—we stopped. Then, spontaneously, the whole afternoon's tension being released like a spring, we charged them.

(What follows may seem confused and incoherent. But this is how I experienced the rioting. I report on only what I saw and heard. Certain incidents are omitted for obvious reasons).

A massive surge of adrenalin. War whoops. Class war whoops. 'Whoops! Class War!' A scramble for bricks. 'I must have a brick. Where are the bricks?' A hail of bricks. The cops are confused as they realise they are no longer in control. Puppets without a role. They look at us, at one another and around themselves. Them. Run. Away. Down Mayall Road, leaving their vehicles in our hands. In the twinkling of a rioting eye the vehicles are smashed up and turned over. A light is instantly provided and poof! Up goes a cop's van. Wild cheers. Laughter, dances of joy. I see a comrade and we beam solidarity at one another.

Our savage celebrations are interrupted by a charge of cops. (They had regrouped with re-inforcements). The crowd splits. The cops are mad. Truncheons thrashing. I run to safety up a side street and meet another comrade. As we point with child-like glee at the rising pall of smoke; a white guy is bricked, inexplicably. He is immediately defended by black youths and all eyes look around for the idiot thrower. A nearby friend has transport and as I got to seek its availability a black guy bearing an old grudge grabs me, revenge in his eyes. Before he can find an excuse to brick me (was the brick which hit the other guy meant for me?) I make it plain that assistance is needed. Van not available. Questions from friends. Tune in to police radio. They are out of their heads. Sounds of windows going in on Coldharbour Lane. Back onto the streets.

In Coldharbour Lane an SPG van is on its side like some stranded whale. A boutique has its windows smashed and twisted dummies litter the pavement. Crowds of onlookers. Glass smashes in Electric Avenue. A jewellers is looted. Another further up. Black and white youths kick their way through the roller shutters. I watch out for cops on Brixton Road, Announce to the passing shoppers, who are all eyes, that free jewellery is available should they want it. Am ignored. Notice that the jewellers is, perfectly, next door to a consumer advice centre. Necklaces, bracelets, rings and watches are thrown into the pavement. Jewellery in the gutter. Great! I have a game of football with some bracelets, a game I can't lose. There are some squabbles over loot. Depressing.

Moveout onto Brixton Road. Burton's tailors is done in and a dummy set ablaze. Magical sight. Cops arrive. Pull dummy onto pavement. The tube station is closed but Brixton Road is still open to traffic. The motorists and bus passengers look in confusion as looting spreads to both sides of the road. A black youth kicks in plate glass windows as if he is swatting flies. More cops. Burglar alarms scream out to deaf ears. More and more cops. Running battles. More looting. Then I notice there's no more traffic. The cops have sealed the main road off from the cop shop to the Town Hall.

Looting and smashing now all along Brixton Road area, the market area and up Acre Lane. My name is called out. Another comrade. We shake hands muttering 'Great! Great!' I give him a garbled resume. Bulk of crowd now around Brixton oval. Woolworths smashed and looted. Television sets, stereo, carted off. Some smashed. Occasional cop van races through and is smashed. Many in the crowd realise cops have to pass us to get into the battle area so crowds line up on either side of Brixton Road with bottles and bricks. 'Here's another' Smash. 'And another' Smash. A proletarian fair-ground. 'And the next one please!' Smash. Everyone a winner. Cops wise up and a convoy arrives, stops and a horde of meanies piles out, truncheons thrashing. Crowd splits up but sniping still possible. A charge and we escape up a side street. All casual, like, we call into a pub for a drink. A rumour goes round that a cop has been kidnapped. My comrade and I smirk into our glasses.

We decide to go to the Frontline. It is now dark and we worm our way through back streets, avoiding cop cordons. We approach the top of the Frontline along Kellett Road and are met with an unbelievable sight. Three rows of cops stretch across the Frontline, facing into it. A non-stop hail of bricks batters their shields. Then suddenly a molotov (the first I've ever seen) comes up and over and smash! whoof! lands on some shields, which are hurriedly dropped. Look down Mayall Road and see the Windsor Castle (pub) ablaze. The Frontline is barricaded with burning vehicles. I'm elated and pissed off. Elated that the Frontline is a no-go area and pissed off that I'm now cut off from defending it. I look around. Exhausted and injured cops sitting on the ground smoking fags. The fires, the cops, the atmosphere. Class war. 'Will they bring the army in?' Belfast.

We detour to the south end of the Frontline, which is also sealed off. Watch a shop blaze. The sub-post office has disappeared. Back to the Town Hall area. Cops now holding strategic positions—the big junction at the Town Hall, the cops station, etc. Still looting. More friends arrive. Talk. Back to the Frontline. All fires out by now. It's getting on for midnight. Things much quieter. Cops slowly regaining control. Up to cop shop. Barricaded with cop vans. Under siege. Cops attack us and force people down back alley. Beatings. Arrests. We are split up. I wander back along Brixton Road surveying damage. Only a few civilians are about now. Cops are in control. Get off the streets. Talk to friends

for hours and then back to Frontline for celebratory drink. One last look at the blitzed Frontline in the dawn light and then sleep. I dream of cops, cops and more cops.

Sunday 12th. Tired, hung-over. Rage at the newspapers. Commissioner McNee and others have the gall to blame 'outside agitators'. (The cops were the outside agitators.) Frontline is crowded with people debating. Lots of cops patrolling warily. Firemen inspect damage. Discuss events with friends. News of arrests. Early evening. More trouble, but more easily contained, as over 1000 more cops are in the area. Brixton is sealed off, up as far as Kennington Oval. Fascist attack in Villa Road [famous squatted street]. Cop station again heavily protected. Cops use 'Nightsun' helicopter for the first time. (Can light up an area the size of a football pitch and is fitted with infra-red cameras.) More cops. They're gaining the upper hand.

### A Long Week

Since the weekend there has been confusion and paranoia. The gutter press stress not only 'outside agitators' but also 'white anarchists conspiracy'. Comrades are raided. (Who's next?) Where are they held? Which court will they appear in? First fines are heavy—£200. Hassles about getting bail. Newspapers print photographs showing faces. (Who's next?) Frontline now quieter than usual. Massive police presence but this isn't immediately visible. Coaches in side streets, up to 2 miles away. Reports filter back about treatment of those arrested. Heavy. Can't sleep. (How can the people of Northern Ireland have survived 10 years of this without cracking up?) The black community is divided. The rally for Easter Sunday is called off. Recriminations. The Brixton Defence Committee and Lambeth Law Centre are organising counter-information and compiling a list of cases against the police. It's still early days yet.

Easter Weekend. Frontline much quieter than usual. Brixton still occupied. All varieties of political groupings trying to colonise the local initiative. (The worst I saw was *Militant*, with the headline 'Brixton—Blame the Tories'.) Difficult to judge the atmosphere. People having to re-think, trying to get these extraordinary events in perspective. It is now a higher level of confrontation. All the shops in the market and main road areas are boarded up. For how long? There is talk of more 'aid' for the community. Sticking plaster for leprosy. Class society is rotten through and through. Where will the next eruption take place? The struggle here is far from over.

For people who live outside Brixton who wish to express solidarity — you have police on your streets.

**THE DAY THE IMAGE CRACKED / THE HONEYMOON  
ENDED / THE GAME WAS UP / DIXON OF DOCK GREEN  
SNUFFED IT etc.....**

My strongest memory of the Brixton riot (two weeks past at time of writing) was the Saturday afternoon that I returned from shopping at the market and found myself increasingly anxious at the large police presence. This pressure made swallowing food or drink difficult and I was unable to concentrate on anything but the source of my cancerous fretting. The arrogant pigs were every where on my route home and the air seemed thick with humid heat and pressure, like before a storm. I put my weekend shopping in my home and when I came outside I heard an explosion and I either laughed or cried and ran along the street. I saw many faces and it was like a dance without a stage /music / popstars or songs; energy began to flow through my arms and legs, I felt like jumping up and down so I did and all around me perhaps 500 people were whooping and yelling hurrah and leaping about. Police were on the run, running away down Leeson Road and a car was being put over to be used as a barricade.....once it was on its side, someone lit some screwed up paper and threw it on the leaking petrol, all stepped back and a small flame suddenly grew into a burst of fire and black smoke clouded up. Down along Railton road I could see some more cars being turned over and I rushed down to help. From the demolition sites of what was once lived in homes lots of us brought out bricks to break up so that smaller pieces could be used to throw and planks of wood to toss on the burnin' cars. Time was at a standstill .....so many bricks did I break up with a an iron fence railing that my hands blistered.....a large sheet of corrugated iron was piled up with debris and dragged up to a big crowd and was quickly emptied at coppers behind long shields. Through the smoke I could see a photographer among the police lines with a telescopic lens trying to focus on the group I was in, so we all threw whatever we could find at him but he was just out of reach and our missiles fell short. Some friends arrived and I wore a scarf to cover my face from the cameras and to keep out the smoke; from then on others too began covering their faces. A bus was liberated and the driver quickly pissed off; following some arguments it was driven down the road at the police lines and it simply went to one side just beyond the burning cars as no-one stayed inside to steer it. But the short journey was a laugh.

So much seems out of time context, my mind jumps forward and back: I can recall observing the police manouvres in Mayall Rd. In particular a group of plainclothes detectives /vigilantes / police in uniform but without their hats, coats and ties, with their sleeves rolled up. Uniformed (and looking very young) formations were

lining up nearby with shields. Then I noticed the long sticks (the 'pick axe handles' rarely mentioned in the media) which these plainclothes lot were handing to each other. One bloody faced and overweight pig, who I recognised from an SPG (State Paid Gangster) raid the week before, was letting off a tirade to those who would listen about 'fucking niggers'. The sight of these goons cursing and tooling up for further aggro made me at once very sick (and I mean really churning inside-have a piss or shit now- and dry throat gagging) and shakingly angry with incredibly strong desire to be a sniper and blow the thugs away with a rifle or some explosive. Together with some other observers we yelled out "FUCK OFF!" and they started to look at all the windows on the side of the street facing them across the derelict site. We were masked and I am sure they did not know what we were capable of, so they closed up closer together and then two with shields moved up to pry sheets of corrugated iron apart to get in across the vacant block at us. Suspecting we might become the victims of a snatch squad we checked out the place for escape and where it was likely the pigs would enter. Somewhere in the street a voice called up and asked us if we were thirsty and we came downstairs and onto the street for some quenching beers - the Managers of the George had pissed off leaving us a lot to drink heh, heh, heh we were all grinning. It was exhilarating; adrenalin and booze went straight to my head, from the street it looked like several cars were on fire in surrounding streets too and I felt like I was realliving. Someone actually said "*This is history and we're here, YAHOO!*" and I felt amazing, no drug can compare to that exuberant rush/high fun feeling. I warned those nearby to look out for possible snatch squads and went up to see the George, Windsor Castle, Post Office, Plumbers and Dr. Khan (I once was refused to be seen by the good Doctor's Secretary and the menstrual pain turned out to be appendicitis) getting looted and burned. All the bad memories attached to places came back and I thought Brixton is going to explode now that we have a chance to get even. I think the Pakistani newsagents in Effra Parade getting burnt out was a mistake as the woman and two kids only just got out in time and the amount of cash or goods was fuck all. What was a target and what was not (the Tory Club and the local Police Doctor were left alone!)? Well it was only the mercenary jerks who were indiscriminate and if the cops had kept out of it for a few days, I think the shithead element would have gotten some aggro back. A woman who was being hassled by some big guys was suddenly surrounded and the men made to leave her alone; likewise some black racists who were picking on a young white were told to fuck off by a quickly gathering group of black, Asian and white, young and old, male and female gay and straight people. The story in the Sun about the rape of a woman which occurred on Saturday night was chosen to divide and frighten people (Black rapists attack white woman headlined!). If

the cops had not kept everyone on the run then this and other incidents which the media did not publicize but I know of ( a lone individual who gave shelter to some fugitives from a police raid, then had to put up with 3 hours of machismo display and knife threats for example) would have been dealt with.

Unable to pass through the police cordon at the base of Railton & Mayall road triangle we walked through the back streets which seemed barely changed compared to the picturesque ruins of Railton Road. A stroll past the police meant no harrassment because they were desperate to keep up some face it seemed; only those running

were stopped. We joined in the window smashing and looting in Electric Avenue and managed to get some booty back through the police cordons by surrounding the person holding the box of goodies and then walking briskly on as if we meant business and did not want to waste time, just get off the street and safely behind doors. Once deposited we went out to see the pitched battle between the rigid lines of police and the dancing rebels. We got in a few bricks, bottles and even saw the shit bags get run off the street by one firebomb armed group who then got stuck in with iron bars on fallen cops. On television was the Space Shuttle but it seemed so ridiculous that I could not watch and went back to the street where real decisions were being made then and there. Fires were up and down the street and on the FM band of the radio the Old Bill seemed to be panicking in the Frontline. But Lima Delta Control urged them on as they had orders from ZULU (Whitelaw or McNee's sick joke?) If only we had been able to break out of Railton Road as a large group and actually attacked the police station and freed the prisoners..... But it was surrounded and the tourist element or passive spectator /innocent bystander types had come as more cops secured the streets. The skirmishes that flared later in the night were hit and run battles , after some soup and sugary tea I collapsed asleep.

SUNDAY - white ribbons with tourists hanging on staring at the burnt out places like zoo exhibits or a fun fair; the idiot priests and social workers who were allowed behind our lines yesterday to get the ultimatum POLICE WITHDRAW and FREE THE PRISONERS for an arrogant Police Chief and media to coldly deny, had today returned with camera and note taking sociologists, TV, radio and paper journalists (I even met one from Brazil TV), self-appointed Community Leaders and the Left who had come to organise us into their dead Parties, slimey fronts and so on to add insult to our police-inflicted injuries. Rumours of fascist vengeance and off-duty police and Army para-military attacks were rife. Politicians

who never said a thing about South London let alone Brixton were suddenly falling over themselves to talk about unemployment, the race issue (sic !), housing, criminals and or 'political extremists' whom the Tory hacks saw as the brains behind the riot. By late afternoon people were brawling with cops again and some looting broke out again. I saw this group of kids grabbing Easter eggs and shouting "*It's Easter early. HA!HA!HA!*" which lifted me right out of the depression I was beginning to slide into. Dogs were being used to keep people on the move, especially away from Brixton Police Station with its ridiculous Crime Prevention Exhibition tent outside. I heard lots of youth decide that there were too many coppers and instead to go up Stockwell / Clapham / Herne Hill / Streatham and then it hit me: What has happened in those areas, why haven't people risen up there? I met people from Balham who had heard nothing but sketchy /flimsy reports and some others from North London who said that nothing was different up there. This was jarring, we had been so well Contained, Isolated, Dispersed that it was all over bar the odd brawl which the bastards would surround and smash much more efficiently second time around. One group of people we ran into were not even prepared to stand and fight, we just ran for several blocks. Surprise was gone and I began to worry about those arrested and the slow painful readjustment to routine and survival - paying up and working again- began to take it's toll. Most changed their appearance except those who cannot go back to the old slow death and lie low waiting to get back to the 'no-go' exhilaration: the chameleons and the bitter will go much, much further next time be it next April, or before?

Similarly, Mr Fairbairn finds himself unable to offer a decisive judgment on the causes of the riots. "I'm not a sociologist, but if you have a society which is disturbed because of unemployment, bad housing etc, resentment is turned inwards on that society and the police, who are easily identifiable, reap a bad harvest."

He did not believe the police should accept a large portion of the blame for Brixton's social turmoil. With professional aplomb, he discounted the allegations of police brutality. He did not condone the use of "undue force" by his officers in any circumstances, he said. Police codes of conduct strictly prohibited it.



Brian Fairbairn

## ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

About 4.30 on the Saturday I went out to buy some tobacco and saw a crowd gathered outside the Car-Hire in Railton Road. There'd been cops up and down our street all day and rumours of police activity over the previous week. Something was going on, so I hung around to see what . People were milling about, some shouting and arguing with the cops, half a dozen or so, who were standing about doing nothing . People continued to gather on their way home from shopping, and more policemen arrived. I couldn't understand it at all, what everybody was waiting for . The police arrived, gathered in a group at the tip of the triangle, couple of dozen of them, discussing among themselves and from the back of the crowd were thrown a few bottles and insults . As soon as they turned around the throwing stopped, but pretty soon more cops arrived. One van was parked in the middle of the street, and suddenly half a dozen blacks ran out and started rocking it, trying to turn it over. The back doors flew open and out leapt 3 or 4 cops with shields and truncheons, and the blacks disappeared into the crowd . Odd bricks and bottles were being thrown whenever the police turned their backs . They were presenting themselves as a target . There wasn't any violence until there were 20 or so cops on the scene . I got the impression that if the original cops had kept their cool and just stood around swapping verbals with the crowd, they'd have got bored and gone home, and no riot, but as it was everybody resented more and more cops arriving. What were they there for if not to threaten? So the missiles got more frequent, the thud of a brick against a van or car is a very distinct sound, gets the adrenalin going . The police decided to do something and formed a line across the street, which was immediately bombarded .

They started to charge, and everybody ran, so they stopped and the crowd regathered. This happened a couple more times, and then someone tipped over and set on fire a police van at the tip of the triangle, behind the police. This was the first fire of the day. Once again the crowd formed, a bit further away this time, and again the police charged, this time chasing the crowd right down Railton Road. After that it seemed to quiet down a bit. In fact the scene shifted the other way down Mayall Road and Railton Road.

Later in the evening, about 7.30pm , I went out again, walking down Rattray Road. At the Railton Road end of every street leading off Rattray Road, a vehicle was burning. I could see a lot of smoke from Railton Road so I walked on down to the top of Effra Parade where a dozen or so cops were standing about, dishevelled, smoking. I'd never seen a cop roll a fag before. I walked past them and down to Chaucer Road, and down there. People had been looting the plumbers there, had got the safe out of the Post Office and were trying to open it while others were wandering about with bottles of booze, and others were setting fires. The road was littered with

bottles, bricks, sticks and riot shields. A Fire Engine was slewed across the road, apparently abandoned. There were no uniforms to be seen anywhere. Railton Road was swathed in smoke, so I crossed over and went up Mayall Road, where all seemed oddly quiet, after the destruction going on in the next street. The Windsor Castle was smashed up, people scrounging round inside. The little shops opposite Leeson Road were open and doing a fine trade in iced drinks. Thinking it was all over I went home, ignorant of the battles still going on and the looting that had taken place in the market area. There were cops at the scene of the beginning of the riot and at the junction with Coldharbour Lane, but none at all down Mayall Road, Railton Road or the back streets immediately off it. The police had obviously abandoned all hope of controlling the rioters, and I figured they'd withdraw, and let them wear themselves out burning and looting, which is what happened. There wouldn't have been any riot if the police hadn't tried to prevent it..

About ten o' clock I went out again. This time there were thousands of cops everywhere, the whole of Railton Road seemed to be on fire, cars still smoking in the street, the fire engines had got in and were hosing down the buildings, illuminated by searchlights, people wandered up and down, still locals, outsiders wouldn't come gasping until the next day, if they could get through the blockade. It was like a scene from the Blitz and my initial exhilaration at the people fighting back, turned to depression, that the result should be the destruction of their own neighbourhood and not that of Sloane Square, say. This time I walked around the market area, every other window seemed to be smashed, several shops on fire, including Woolworths, which produced a loud bang just as I walked past, the only incident, apart from the police charges, that frightened me all evening.

People kept ringing up to see if we were all right, apparently not realising how specific the fighting was, under the impression it was a race riot, which it wasn't. It was a reaction against the police attempt to regulate if not repress local West Indian culture, which taking place as it does on the street, offends the eyes of Authority. People sitting indoors smoking are not a threat, people doing it in the street are, they get to know one another and form a community, rather than being atomised, and rendered impotent. Without that street culture the blacks wouldn't have been victimized by the police, and without that culture they couldn't have fought back so successfully.

**WARNING: THE LAUGHTER IS EXPLOSIVE!**

## SATURDAY 9pm

Sitting in a flat in Streatham - pleasantly pissed after a picnic on the Common . nice weather . cup of coffee. - anyone mind if I put the radio on?.....- no.

*" the London suburb of Brixton is in a State of siege tonight after a night of rioting . Shops have been burned and looted and forty seven police have been injured ."*

-bloody hell -

-let's go -

confusion, indecision, fear, hope.

wait for the bus . ten minutes. black teenager says - no buses to Brixton - we walk . quickly.

Brixton Hill - we see smoke over towards the market. thousands of Police. they're scared. very scared. cross Acre Lane to go down the high street . they stop us. *"CAN'T go down there"* . up Acre Lane. line of cops with riot shields across Delmere Close. We try the pavement anyway. *"OI YOU, you can't go down there"*.

*"well which way can I get home then?"* (try them out a bit) .

They're angry and frightened. *"DON'T ARGUE, just move"*.

they start getting edgy - riot shields twitch visibly and some move towards us. *"I'm not arguing - I'm asking."*

*"MOVE"* one of them repeats *"don't argue"*. they get closer. we back off quietly up the Hill.

**S**kirt around Brixton. **B**ack home at Kennington for a coffee and a change of clothes into something inconspicuous and empty all our pockets. We talk about what to do. We want to see Brixton, but we're also feeling a bit adventurous.

- every copper in South London will be in Brixton now. How about a bit of looting in Camberwell or Kennington? spread the area of revolt - let's see Brixton first - ok - we take rucksacks anyway.

move in cautiously down Coldharbour Lane, corner of Atlantic Road - under the bridge - we stop and gape in wonder . Coldharbour Lane seems to be on fire . Railton Road can't be seen for smoke . fire engines, police cordons, SPG vans, police seem to be calmer here, taking control, not many of them.

a familiar face .

*"been here long?"*

*"ten minutes"*.

*"same"*.

*"seen much?"*

*" Heard a rumour that the old Bill killed someone "*.

*"Shit!"* but then I realize it's too quiet for that .

He pisses off. Old Irish guy starts talking about rebellion. We

realize he could go on for hours so we move on - sightseeing.

We try to get down towards Railton Road.

*"You can't go down there".*

we move off politely . more sightseeing - looted shops, broken glass everywhere . Up and down the High Street .

big gaps in memory

Brixton oval - big group of old friends. Fifteen of us suddenly together.

*"I been here since it started"* a friend says grinning from ear to ear. A few stories . Wander down the High street. Wall to wall cops. We scare them a bit . They've been trying to stop groups gathering. Fifteen of us amble casually down the street . It looks like something starting . They move us on when we stop, keep us in pairs or threes when we move . Everywhere is smashed. It's beautiful.

walk up and down sightseeing .

gaps in the memory

A guy is pulling a lighter out of a broken jeweller's window through the grille. I stand between him and the nearest police fifty yards away. He walks off with it casually.

Hanging around near the Lambeth Town Hall. Suddenly blue lights flashing. Blue, blue, flashing lights lights lights lights dozens of them, vans cars, bells, sirens, screaming down the Hill - its on - summat's up - start walking down the hill - casual like.

Someone yells *"the young black coloured kids are here . the coloured kids have arrived."*

No time for questions - walking quickly - black teenagers on the other side of the road start running down the hill - they're not scared at all - some in the road - some on the pavement .

Some of us start running - big group of black women in front of us - more people in front of them. and blue lights - those blue lights.

Two or three vans stop - they pile out - riot shields . *"BACK! BACK!"* they stop us and force us back up the hill - maybe thirty of them. Fifty of us. Pushing and Shoving. I stay near the front. Pushing - they get us to the stop . Guy next to me says we could turn, take them on, push them back, fight them back . I treat it with the contempt it deserves. Keep moving .

They give one black guy a hard time. ~~he~~ pushes back at the corner, they grab him, women grab him back screaming - a voice shouts charge! let 'em have it! - they run.

Screams, running boots. I'm well in front so I hang about a second. People run down a dark alley. The cops are running still.

I can see truncheons flying I just fly out up the street no time for bravery .

Suddenly in a strange housing estate. a group of a dozen cops, some in shirt sleeves jog in step like army double time through a courtyard .

Bottom of the hill. fuck where is everyone? .must find them.

no sign of anything happening here. cop station quiet . it was probably all a false alarm. I look around - lost. a big cheer. I look up the Hill and a Police Landrover is limping down slowly the back left tyre flapping uselessly about. laughter all round.

Back up to the estate. meet two friends again. the cops are looking for someone in the estate. this is low profile time. let's re-group, find the others - who got done?

Eventually we gather together a few more. Sightseeing. people going home.cops arriving by the busload . when we leave at midnight the ratio is about one to one and they're still arriving. everyone goes home.

Back at the flats . two people busted - they ran down the alley - there had been cops at the bottom!! sod's Law - the two who got busted were the one's with the worst records .

Home to bed . I close my eyes and there are blue flashing lights everywhere.

Next day I expect the afternoon to be quiet so I go out, arrive back in Brixton at six - reach Saint John's Crescent - they're stopping people - residents only allowed in. the road block was at Camberwell New Road. I don't even try to get through . up Saint John's Crescent down the back streets - literally thousands of cops in buses behind the station. Lots of horses. I walk through them all unhindered and come out about fifty yards past where they had stopped people .

Walk up and down sightseeing - no-one i know is about. look at a few burnt out buildings . Railton Road carpeted with bricks and glass. burnt out cars everywhere. It's beautiful.

Top of the Hill by the Town Hall. the road's blocked so everyone hangs about in the middle of the road watching. we get too many for their liking so they charge up the Hill, clear us out of the church yard. a woman had some bricks that she's throwing on the ground trying to break them . I show her how to break them cleanly in half against the corner of the kerbstone. fighting in Coldharbour Lane - they charge again and clear us off Effra Road. not enough of us.

Black teenage gang . one says " *ok who's for the burning and the looting and the pilfering in Streatham?* "

Great!

They set off - maybe a dozen. I wait ten minutes' watching the to-ing and fro-ing on the Hill then I follow.

I get to Streatham . nothing. dead. I sit in a doorway and wait half an hour.

Nothing doing. I wander back . get back to the end of Brixton Hill by the road block - another group heading South, maybe twenty this time, black and white, mainly early teens. I tag along .

Three or four police vans pass us and stop a hundred yards ahead. we stop and cross the road. they turn and come back, piling out. we piss off into a housing estate. I find I'm quite good at hurdling fences. wait on the grass in the shadows. more running . three or four of us start going over the chain link fence into the school - about 8 feet high . someone says wait and see if they come around. we drop down and wait. they come around the back. we run. I yell "*they're coming round the back*". everyone gets out into the street. down by the lights outside the pub. people disperse. one guy gets arrested as a few more vans arrive and about a dozen go screaming off towards Streatham.

well that's the end of that idea.

Sit down by the road block. I watch the cops and consider the possibility of a brick through the window of the car in front of me. too many cops. nice idea though. sit for half an hour then back to Brixton. quiet. very quiet. it's all over.

Walking back down the Hill two black teenagers behind me. one says to his friend "*I bet there's all these coloured Ladies really glad they brought up their kids proper and then a copper knocks on their door and says 'excuse me have you got a son called Kevin?' and she says 'yes'. 'well he's in Brixton nick'*" Laughter. we're criminals in a way our parents don't understand. back home. think about it. "*next time*". "*next time*". "*if only.....*" but what ever else, next time I won't be so scared.

## *A RIOT A DAY KEEPS THE COPPER AWAY*

I hadn't heard about what happened on Friday night (10.4.81), so when I got down to Railton Road Saturday lunch time, I wondered why there were so many police hanging around. The police later said that they had done a low-key operation that morning, but that was obviously rubbish. There were groups of police every fifty yards and others in cars and vans, so they were out in force and prepared for some kind of action.

I was told about the events of Friday night and most people I spoke to felt very nervous about the numbers of police hanging around like gangsters. When we heard the sirens coming from the bottom of the triangle (the junction of Mayall Rd and Railton Rd) we walked down to see what would happen. A lot of people were doing the same, mostly out of curiosity. The police later said that the riot was planned because a lot of people were hanging around the area on street corners etc., but that just shows their ignorance. In Brixton there are always people hanging around the streets, especially when it's sunny, simply because there's nowhere else to go.

When I got to the bottom of Railton Road I saw a police van and a car with a crowd around, blacks and white. I had no idea what was going on but people were arguing with the police who were quite aggressive. One of the 'higher officers' was really nasty; he had taken his ID numbers off his shoulders, and the crowd were pissed off about that. People with cameras were taking photos and police later claimed these 'white photographers' were in leading or organising positions but again it's rubbish. After Friday night people knew something might happen and a number of local people wanted to take photos if anything happened. No one was in a leading position. Finally one copper pushed a black kid hard and that was it. People just threw everything!

That was the spark and for the next six or seven hours we were involved in one of the 'worst breakdowns of law and order'.

Nothing I can write can describe the exhilaration I felt when that first police van went up in flames. From that spark it spread up and down Brixton. For so long the police had an arrogant air of invincibility, as if they could do anything they liked and get away with it. But that burning police van and retreating cops did more to boost our confidence than anything else.

Most people grouped around the middle of Railton Rd. The police had moved up to Mayall Rd up as far as Leeson Rd and many of us were stoning them to get them to retreat, but they made a wall of riot shields. It was totally spontaneous; no one told us to attack here or there, we saw for ourselves and if we felt the need to fight here and there we did so. The crowd kept a constant barrage of bricks and bottles but the police wouldn't move. People called for petrol bombs but none had been prepared. Police talk about bomb-factories is the result of their own inability to understand how a riot works; they cannot understand how a non-hierarchical system works.

It didn't take long for the petrol bombs to appear; all it takes is some petrol a bottle and a bit of paper or rag, it doesn't need any experience or brains.