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Breaking out of the Ghetto

Jean Weir

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The struggles taking place in the inner city ghettos are often misunderstood as mindless violence. The young struggling against exclusion and boredom are advanced elements of the class clash. The ghetto walls must be broken down, not enclosed.

The young Palestinians throwing stones at the Israeli army rightly have the sympathy and solidarity of comrades who see them in their just struggle for freedom from their colonial oppressors. When we see even the very young of Belfast throwing stones at British soldiers we have no doubt about their rebellion against the occupying army whose tanks and barbed wire enclose their ghettos.

There is an area of young people today however who find themselves in just as hard a battle against their oppressors, who find themselves constantly marginalised and criminalised. These young people do not find themselves fighting a liberation struggle against an external invader, but are immersed in an internal class struggle that is so mystified that its horizons are unclear even to themselves. This war is taking place within what have come to be known as the “inner cities” of Britain, areas that are now recognised by the class enemy — the capitalists, with the monarchy leading, and the State

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in all its forms — as the most fragile part of the class society, one that could open up the most gigantic crack and give way to unprecedented violence.

The young struggling for survival from exclusion and boredom in the deadly atmosphere of the ghettos of the eighties are in fact among the most advanced elements in the struggle in Britain.

As such they find themselves surrounded by a sea of hostility and incomprehension, even by those who in terms of their official class positions should be their comrades in struggle. No trade union or left wing party has anything to say about their struggle. They are among the first to criminalise it and relegate its protagonists to the realm of social deviance, perhaps with the distinguishing variable that instead of the short sharp shock treatment they prefer to employ an army of soft cops and social psychiatrists.

The anarchist movement itself, anti-authoritarian by definition and revolutionary in perspective, has so far produced nothing tangible as a project of struggle which encompasses the “real” anarchists, the visceral anti-authoritarians. The forms the violence from the ghettos takes does not have the content of moral social activity that anarchists want to find. This cannot emerge spontaneously from situations of brute exploitation such as exist in the urban enclosures. Suggestions such as those of taking this morality into the ghettos which are then to be defended and “self-managed” in our opinion are quite out of place. They ring of the old “Takeover the City” slogans of Lotta Continua years ago, now just as dead as that organisation itself. The problem is not self-managing the ghettos, but breaking them down. This can only come about through clear indications of a class nature, indicating objectives in that dimension and acting to extend the class attack.

The article by the Plymouth comrades gives an indication of what is happening in most major-and many smaller cities in Britain today. These events do not reach the headlines. In fact most of what happens is not reported at all.

Clearly the conditions of the clash are very different to those where the presence of a tangible “outside enemy” has clarified the position of the whole of the exploited against the common enemy. There is no doubt in Sharpeville or Palestine or Belfast about what happens to those who collaborate with the police. In this country on the contrary, the fact that the latter have made inroads into gaining the active collaboration of people within the ghettos themselves shows the barriers of fear and incomprehension that exist and divide the exploited in one area.

Levels of cultural and social mystification have succeeded to some extent in confusing class divisions. By defining the violence of the young in pathological or ethnic terms the latter find themselves isolated and ostracised even by those who are nearest to them in terms of exploitation.

The dividing line is a fine one, however, and it can take only a mass confrontation with the ‘forces of order’ to demonstrate to all where the real enemy lies. This happened in the Brixton riots for example where parents, seeing the police brutality at close hand, immediately moved from a tacit consensus to open antagonism towards them.

Maintaining consensus from people who have very little to gain from the “social order” involves a complex network of media, social workers, school teachers, community leaders, community police, etc, all of whom are recognised as being in positions of authority. That authority is tolerated unwillingly today. It could break down completely tomorrow.

Our work must therefore be in the direction of continually clarifying and extending the class attack by identifying and striking objectives that are easily attainable and comprehensible in the perspective of breaking down the walls of the ghettos and opening up a perspective of mass action against the common enemy.