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Abstract: This article examines the prevalence of racial violence in the UK's night-time economy. Fifty-five racial attacks are documented over a six month period, showing the risks faced by members of the public and workers for takeaway's, taxi firms, convenience stores and service stations. It argues that flexible and highly casualised labour conditions, combined with increasing numbers of immigration raids, exacerbate the risk of racial violence.

Violence, racism and the night-time economy

According to a range of politicians, think-tanks, columnists and government spokespeople popular racism in the UK is over.[1] For the Labour government a lack of community cohesion came to be defined as the problem; for the Conservative's it is the 'doctrine of state sponsored multiculturalism'. Yet, defining racism out of popular debate belies a daily reality of abuse, attack and harassment. Rather than disappearing, the threat of racial violence permeates certain sections of the economy, exacerbated by the same political conditions in which its existence is downplayed.

In the early hours of the morning on 13 October 2010, Pankaj Rawat, a 21-year-old Indian shop assistant, was admitted to hospital urgently needing surgery after being attacked by a group of white men in Edinburgh. Rawat had been walking home from a friend's party when he heard a woman, struggling against two men (one of whom was trying to kiss her), calling for help. After telling the attackers that he would call the police unless they left her alone, the men turned on him and called him an 'Indian bastard', before punching him to the floor and kicking him repeatedly while he was prone on the ground. Three other men, who were friends of the attackers, stood around the assault so as to prevent any witnesses from seeing what was happening. After being rushed to hospital, Rawat had a metal plate inserted into his broken jaw and, when he told his employers about the attack, was sacked from his job as he was not allowed time off to recover.

Rawat's case is one of fifty-five media reported incidents of racial violence in the UK, occurring within the context of the night-time economy that the Institute of Race Relations documented in the six months between August 2010 and January 2011.[2] These attacks ranged from abuse to physical violence and, in almost all cases, the victim was either alone or nonetheless outnumbered by his or her attackers. In some cases, the attackers used or threatened to use weapons including hammers, knives and blocks of concrete. Many people required hospital treatment and the vast majority of incidents were reported to have taken place over weekends, either in the evening or in the early hours of the morning.

Night-time economic activity has risen dramatically over the last 30 years, largely through a significant increase in the number of licensed premises. In the 1970s, as manufacturing industries declined, specific local economies were decimated and in some places 'entire towns were left on the scrap-heap'.[3] The subsequent redevelopment of urban areas, in the latter decades of the 20th century and beyond, has seen towns and cities encouraged to compete financially with each other and market themselves to attract investment. In the process, the development of the night-time economy has been actively encouraged – to a greater or lesser extent – by local authorities which, afraid of their cities becoming 'hollowed-out ghost towns' have encouraged 'investment in the night-time economy … often through a relaxation of the licensing laws'.[4]

As a result – and particularly in the context of the economic downturn – many towns and cities have developed in a way which can be described as 'two-faced'.[5] Faced with increased competition from, for example, out of town shopping centres and the aggressive activities of supermarkets, many high-streets have declined to such an extent that according to some financial analysts they are likely never to recover. On average, 14.5 per cent of shops are boarded up but in some areas this figures rises to 37.4 per cent.[6] Conversely, the night-economy, inherent with multiple commercial opportunities, is considered by some economists to be a financial success. According to an index drawing from a national database of businesses, in 2010, it was responsible for ten per cent of all UK employment, eight per cent of all UK firms and six per cent of all UK turnover. Valued at £66 million and employing 1.3 million people it, according to this data, has 'been a resilient component of the economy during a period when the UK lost over 2 million jobs'.[7]

Patterns of racial violence

Twenty of the fifty-five attacks carried out in the context of the night-time economy which we researched were on people as they were walking through public spaces at night or whilst they were in, or in the vicinity of, bars, pubs and clubs. These incidents included, for example, an attack in August 2010, described as 'brutal' by the police, by a group of white men on a Romanian couple in the town centre of Halstead in Essex. The woman was left bruised, with cracked teeth, grazes and a black eye. They also included the assault of a 55-year-old black male, in October 2010, outside a nightclub in Bedford by two white men which left the victim with a broken ankle and a broken cheekbone. That same month, in Plymouth, a Kurdish man was assaulted and racially abused by a white man who beat him to the ground and went on to whip him repeatedly with a belt. And the following month, in Edinburgh, a 37-year-old man had a glass smashed over his head in a racist attack which cut him so deeply he needed plastic surgery.

But whilst these incidents indicate the nature of attacks carried out on members of the public, our research also draws attention to racial violence carried out on those who work in the night-time economy. The growth and resilience of the night-time economy, in a context when many other industries have suffered, is in part tied to a parallel emergence of subsidiary industries which, in effect, service the late-night sector. These industries, including takeaways, fast-food outlets, taxi firms, convenience stores and service stations selling items such as alcohol and cigarettes are often staffed by people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities on temporary contracts and working for low wages.

Such industries survive, in many instances, by transferring the risks posed by volatile economic conditions from employers to employees. According to the New Economics Foundation, for example, employment in takeaways is 'likely to be undervalued, part-time, precarious, unstructured, and badly paid'.[8] A flexible labour force which is often unprotected can be hired and fired at will to meet upturns and downturns in customer demand. And this workforce, according to our research, is also exposed to a risk of racist violence. Typical of the thirteen cases which we documented, involving members of staff of takeaways and restaurants, was an incident where two males racially abused a 50-year-old employee in Derbyshire and punched him in the face. In another attack, in November 2010, a businessman who intervened to prevent a group of men racially abusing staff in a Chinese takeaway in Lancashire was dragged outside and beaten so severely that his ankle bone was shattered.

What these attacks emphasise is the way in which employment conditions shape and are shaped by shifting forms of racism. Mini-cabs firms, for example, often utilise a model of self-employment where drivers are responsible for the upkeep of their cars and pay rent to an agency which assigns them jobs. Given that the start-up costs to become taxi-drivers are relatively low, large numbers of people from migrant communities have historically entered this profession as work in manufacturing industries declined and discrimination kept them out of other job markets.[9] Yet with wages often low, drivers may have to take on jobs, which could potentially put them in danger, simply to meet industry overheads. A Romanian taxi driver, who picked up five passengers in the early hours of one morning in December 2010, experienced first-hand the extent to which the threat of violence permeates such working conditions. After he started the car, his passengers punched him repeatedly, subjected him to racist abuse and threatened him with a knife. His case was one of five where drivers or workers in taxi-ranks were attacked and, in some of these incidents, the perpetrators also damaged the car which drivers relied upon to make a living.

This combination of physical harm and criminal damage was also common in incidents where staff in service stations or convenience stores were assaulted or abused. More often than not, violence in this context took place when a member of the public was refused the sale of cigarettes or alcohol. In Manchester a teenage girl hit a service counter and racially abused an Asian shopkeeper who thought she was too young to buy cigarettes. In Gloucestershire a family who live above their shop were left terrified when four men shouted racist abuse outside their home and threw a brick through their front door. A man who threw a punch at a member of staff in a convenience store in Wrexham, who refused him service, later told the police that he attacked the victim 'because he is black, so he is a P**i'. The list goes on and includes workers in other professions such as bus-drivers, staff on the London Underground and workers in hospitals.

Ultimately, such attacks can prove fatal. In 2007, for example, two men were given life sentences for the racially aggravated murder of taxi-driver Mohammed Parvaiz in Huddersfield. The attackers lured Parvaiz to a quiet cul-de-sac, smashed up his car, beat him to the ground and then stamped on him until he was left dying. According to the judge in their trial, the sentences they received reflected the careful planning that had gone into the killing. Whilst in 2010 an investigation began into the murder of Simon San, a driver for a Chinese takeaway. San was attacked by three teenagers who were part of a group which had been harassing staff in the takeaway for months. Although the attackers' lawyer argued that the murder was not racially motivated, San's family disagreed and lodged a complaint against the police for their inadequate response to frequent calls that had been made about this ongoing abuse. The last call they received may have been from San himself who desperately rang for help from inside his car, as it was being shaken by the teenagers who moments later went on to kill him.[10]

Contradictory policing strategies

The conditions and economic insecurities experienced by those in the night-time economy mark out many workers as what the economist Guy Standing calls the new 'precariat': a growing section of the population who are unprotected, with limited access to secure housing and often disengaged from mainstream politics.[11] Many – potentially hundreds of thousands – are employed as undocumented workers in conditions with little or no health and safety protections. Others, with permission to work, often have to nonetheless negotiate numerous occupational risks in the context of their employment. Whether working 'legally' or

'illegally' though, these are the workers who bear the cost of former Prime Minister Tony Blair's pledge to make the UK 'the most lightly regulated labour market of any leading economy in the world'.[12] And these are the workers who expose the brutal reality behind David Cameron's commitment to 'reducing regulation and maintaining a flexible and dynamic labour market'.[13]

The coalition government, wedded to ensuring that 'Britain is open for business...',[14] is prepared to utilise the criminal justice system to ensure that this 'dynamic labour market' operates efficiently and effectively. As a consequence, recognising the extent to which violence in the night-time economy hampers its ability to function, it has pledged to ensure extra policing and criminal justice powers. In its 2010 pre-election manifesto the Conservative party promised to give local authorities the power to charge extra money for late-night licenses and use these finances to pay for additional policing.[15] And in various ways, resources and efforts have been spent on reducing violence in the night-time economy though a plethora of initiatives and strategies.

For workers in this sector, however, this commitment to ensuring a particular vision of the market is something of a double-edged sword. For at the same time as continuing the Labour government's efforts to respond to violence in the night-time economy, the present government also has continued to vigorously pursue their drive to track down and remove those who are working without permission. According to the UK Border Agency (UKBA), 'Illegal working hurts good business, undercuts legal workers and creates illegal profits.'[16] As such, significant resources have been invested in enforcing removal targets and establishing dedicated teams of immigration officers to track down 'immigration offenders'. These strategies are in large part based on subjecting businesses in the night-time economy to immigration raids. For the employee, they often lead to imprisonment, immigration detention and ultimately removal. For the employer they result in a fine (set at £10,000 per worker) and details of the raid being made public via the UKBA and, in many cases, local media. The first four months of 'naming and shaming' in this way revealed that 95 per cent of those targeted were Turkish, Vietnamese, South Asian and Chinese businesses.[17]

In this context, entire sectors in the night-time economy are targeted simultaneously both as victims and as offenders. That this is inherently contradictory is made clear in, for example, findings that many employers are far more likely to be subjected to sanctions for immigration offences than they are for employing workers in substandard and dangerous conditions.[18] It also means that attempts to respond to violence against workers within the night-time economy are in some ways undermined by attempts to root out workers who are liable for removal. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that increasing sections of this labour force have begun to organise and demand rights for adequate protection against both racial violence *and* against the intensification of immigration raids. These actions have included strikes, protests, the production of manuals containing personal safety advice and calls for CCTV in taxis.[19] They contain a demand for rights as workers against the precarious working conditions and personal dangers which, ultimately, are perpetuated by a desire for a flexible, disposable, labour force deemed essential for the revitalisation and regeneration of towns and cities throughout the UK.

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