

Steel barriers, Samosa's and St George's Flag: EDL visit Dudley

Around 500 English Defense League (EDL) members descended to Dudley on Saturday 17th July to demonstrate against plans to build a new mosque. The protest follows on from a previous demonstration in April 2010, where around 2000 EDL member came to Dudley. The EDL was granted permission by the council to protest on Stafford Street, close to the town centre and near areas where ethnic minority populations are high.

During the protest the EDL supporters attentively listened to anti-Islam speeches, chanted out 'E E EDL', and generally hurled anti-Muslim and racist abuse. As beer flowed the protest soon turned violent as EDL members hurled bricks and fences at the police. Eventually fifty EDL members broke through the police lines, rampaged through Dudley, threw bricks at the mosque and at the Muslim crowds who had gathered. They also attacked three Asian women in their cars, attacked a Hindu temple and destroyed bus stops; eleven windows were smashed in Black and Asian areas, highlighting the councils folly in allowing the EDL to assemble near areas populated by ethnic minorities. EDL corrosive violence surfaced through the rhetoric of peaceful protests.

On the same day Unite Against Fascism (UAF) organised a 'one community festival' near Dudley Zoo, attended by around 200 protesters. In contrast to the violent EDL, UAF supporters peacefully cooperated with the police. Instead of hatred the 'one community festival' was a vibrant bustle of local music, localized dub poetry, and speeches about the virtues of diversity from the Muslim, Christian and local community. I was personally touched by an Asian Christian minister, a former soldier, who encouraged us all to unite in the vision of humanity.

The number of people against the EDL on the streets was higher than the attendance at the festival as many of the young Muslims, understandably, remained near the mosque to offer protection from potential attacks. The vibrant UAF protest finished on time and peacefully. Many of the local protesters dispersed quickly from Dudley, especially those who traveled from neighbouring Black Country and distant regions like London. After the planned protest some of the protesters remained and joined the Muslim men at Dudley Central mosque, offering further support and solidarity.

The riot police were out in numbers and there were rumours that the EDL would head over to the mosque. The rumors turned out to be true. EDL members were seen at Dudley bus station, where a small stairway at the back of the depot leads to the mosque. But they were foiled. Thankfully the police had erected a sturdy steel barrier preventing access from the bus depot to the mosque area.

But this didn't deter them. A crowd of EDL members gathered 100 metres away at the bus depot and taunted the crowd gathered at the mosque. They chanted anti-Muslim slogans and racial abuse. They also threw bricks at the 200 or so strong, majority Muslim crowd and mosque. One missile, a big brick, landed with a great thud, just a few meters from where I was standing. We all fell silent and froze. And then, all of a sudden, we all instinctively

darted back. If the brick landed on someone there would have been serious injury but luckily no one got hurt and nothing was damaged. But the majority of Muslims' and a minority UAF crowd were clearly angered by these violent acts and the riot police prevented any acts of assertive self-defense by the Muslim youth. Eventually the police cleared the EDL out of the bus stop. In their pathetic final effort I saw a small number of EDL members wave the St George's flag near Dudley zoo, as they stumbled back to their homes. I wonder if they knew that St George was born in Turkey and that his mother was Palestinian? I guess not.

It was a long day and we were tired and thirsty. The EDL was out of sight, and a friend of ours had to go to work, 6pm start. So the three of us decided to go back home. We had to wait a while before the riot police let us through the lines, EDL members had to be cleared from Dudley, according to the riot police officer; we were technically contained, unable to freely move. As we waited a young Muslim man approached one of the riot police officers, and he surprisingly told him that 'you're my favorite police man' and offered him a coke. The officer smiled, laughed and politely refused. A blue uniform, truncheon, riot shield, and friendly banter by a young Muslim guy. I was taken aback by the momentarily glance of humanity. Only in Dudley would the riot police be greeted with friendly banter. Only Dudley. After a few minutes, the officer said the EDL had cleared out and he let us through. We were on the move.

We walked casually up Dudley high street, whilst glancing back at some drunkard EDL members; so much for the clearing, I thought. We hesitated and wondered whether we should go back. We couldn't be bothered and besides they didn't look that hard. The high street seemed longer than normal, each shop passed slowly behind us. There were hardly any police left in the centre, and this heightened the emptiness of the streets. It was pretty much deserted. We were relieved to walk into a crowd of Muslim young men, and instantly felt calmer, knowing that we were fully safe now. After passing through more police lines, cordoned off areas and TV cameras, we finally got home.

My friend went to his evening shift while we ate some left-over samosas from our one community celebration at Paul's house, a seasoned Sikh activist who relentlessly organized against BNP and now the EDL. Whilst eating the samosa I was told that one samosa is like eating ten cheese toasties. I put another samosa on my plate, and squirted the chutney until the crisp edges were damp. An hour or so after eating, we finally plucked our bodies of the sofa. Before I could leave auntyji gave me a bag full of samosas, channa, and chutney. I placed the heavy greasy carrier bag into my rucksack. Auntyji was nervous about us going again, but I told her that if anyone tries to attack us I would throw a samosa at them! She laughed. We jumped on our bikes to survey the damage post EDL.

It was a somber, yet strangely exciting bike ride; there was an edge about town; the police were still visible on the streets. Our first stop was to check out Stafford Street, where the EDL protested. It was a mess. All the fencing was mangled and there was one lonely red and white England bowler hat amongst the carnage; beer bottles, special brews, dirty looking flags still

hanging on the wall, and bricks and mortar all over the place. It didn't look like the site of a peaceful protest. You could feel that this was a space of menace just a few hours ago. The police looked at me surveying the damage, reassuring me that it was a safe place now. It was eerie standing where hundreds of people stood hours before, united in their hatred of Muslims. I was deeply saddened and pensive, and glanced over the mangled fences, with the iconic Dudley castle in the corner of my eye. I took out the bag of samosas from my back-pack, got out my camera and started to take pictures. But I knew I could never capture a shot that encompassed how sad and rotten I felt.

A few minutes bike ride away we photographed the smashed-up bus stop near the Hindu temple. Whilst I was taking photographs a car nervously and quietly parked right in front of me, and slowly opened his window, shouting: 'are you freelance'. I said 'yes', even though I wasn't. He went on to tell us both that there was an Asian family, women, who had been attacked and left stranded in the near-by car park without the 'fucking police' as he assertively told us.

I am angry now, fire rising from my belly to my head, I want to scream – why does this shit keep happening! But I passively listen to the brother. He was keen that I took pictures of the incident; he was openly vexed. He looked like an Asian bad boy, someone I would not mess with. His beard was cool, lined, like a tram-line to his chin. Paul told him that we would go to them; we would keep them safe. So we both thanked him. Paul knew the way, so he led, and I followed with a full view of his hairy backside. I let him know this, and he pulled his t-shirt down, covering his builder's bum. We laugh pass the police officers and riot vans, as we nervously peddle to the car park.

It was a horrible sight. I could see two cars parked close to each other and two Asian males, one casual approachable looking guy with a cap wearing a bright blue jumper, and the other shorter smarter man wearing glasses, looking more defensive. As I got closer I noticed a startled, anxious young Asian women in the passenger seat of the silver car. The smashed window of the other maroon car caught my eye. We both asked if they were ok. And they immediately said they were, but I could tell, in my heart, that they were scared and suspicious of us. Asian men have got a bad rep around here.

I stupidly asked if I could take pictures, and got a robust 'no'. So my friend wisely engaged in conversation, and their defenses started to ease; the two men spoke good English. They dropped their defenses completely once they figured out that we were local and there to support them. They told us that the EDL mob called them pakis as they smashed the windows. All this brutality whilst their wives and family were in the car. I briefly drifted off.... how do you feel after such an attack? What brutality?

My gaze returned to the two men. I can see and feel their fear. The guy with the cap, I could tell, was trying hard to keep it together. He spoke and looked into the distance, containing his palpable emotions. I got the sense that making eye contact with me would have been too much. I drift off again, I feel my body droop, my hope slipping, my humanity draining, sucking me down

as I imagined the attack, and wondered what I would have done if it was my mothers car....

The maroon car's front window was smashed, but intact and the back was completely smashed, glass all over the back seat, air flowing through. The white car side window was covered with a bin bag, taped to the door. The women were now gone and the men were waiting for the car to be towed away. They were alone in a large empty car park, surrounded by unused offices, closed down nightclubs, a gurdwara in the distance, and ironically opposite the site of the planned mosque. They asked us to stay with them, they were scared, and so were we, in honesty, I was anxious, the place felt errie, unsafe, but we felt a strong compulsion to stay. We stayed.

They asked me to take photos. I could feel their mix of anger and fear now. So I got out my camera, started taking pictures and continued to engage with my two new older Asian male friends in conversation. I shot away, like a professional war photo-journalist, gaining evidence, visually portraying the story of ethnic violence. But it wasn't a documentary about Darfur in Africa, it was Dudley car park, it was England, it was my hometown.

Although busy with my camera I noticed that three cars came into the car park together. Why a convoy for a boring car park when the town is completely shut? I became alert, old skool 1980s mentality kicked in. The three cars were full of menacing looking white men, surveying the damage of the car. It felt like a psychology journey for them, coming back to the scene after the crime. I was tense, nervous, and sensed that a kicking was on the way. They were staring at me, I was staring at them; the kicking felt closer. I knew we could not take them on; they out numbered us, they were young. I instinctively knew they would win. I assertively told everyone to split. I threw my camera in my back-pack, threw it over my shoulders and strapped it tight; I was ready. The cars had slowed down by now, their windows were open, they were looking at the attacked cars and they were looking at us. They must have been only 15 meters away. It felt uncomfortably close.

I noticed a pale white guy with freckles and ginger hair; his eyes are locked onto mine, like a jet fighter ready to release his missile. The two Asian men, now I know Gujarati and Hindu guys, jumped in the car and were ready to drive off. I jumped on my bike and started to peddle. My friend is a head of me, peddling. He is making some distance now. I stop. Look back. I feel I need proof that they are racist, I need those magic words – fucking paki. But no magic words. Our eyes lock again, as I sit on my bike, body angled away but my head square with the freckled white guy with ginger hair. He has me locked again. It feels like we have been locked eye-ball to eye-ball for hours. Time stopped, the space grew around us. I know and he knows that we are enemies for that time, that space, our gazed still locked. We break eye contact. I peddle off in a rush, heart beating fast, legs wobbling but strong. I glance back, I know that they won't catch me; too fit, too strong, too street-wise. I want to do a moonshine so confident that they won't get me. I give the thought some attention, let him see my full blazing brown ass, but I decide not to. I wish I did now.

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