

# British government threatens to use emergency powers against fuel protesters

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On Monday night a meeting of the Queen's unelected Privy Council at her Balmoral residence in Scotland empowered the government to use troops if necessary to break up demonstrations, and approved an order that would require oil companies to ensure distribution of fuel across the country and maintain supplies to the emergency services and schools.

Home Secretary Jack Straw also chaired an unscheduled session of the Civil Contingencies Committee, which co-ordinates the government's actions at a time of national emergency.

Blair cancelled a tour of the Yorkshire region to hold an emergency government meeting in London yesterday, on whether to invoke the emergency powers granted by the Queen under Britain's archaic and semi-feudal constitutional provisions. Blair has made repeated statements that he will not bow to pressure to lower fuel taxes. He promised to use "any means necessary" to keep the country moving. Education Secretary David Blunkett has argued that emergency powers were needed to prevent hospitals, schools and emergency services from running out of fuel.

Though the government ruled out an immediate use of troops, it made clear it expected more forceful intervention by the police. A spokesman for Blair said, "He is giving his strong support to whatever decisions [the police] have to take."

This response is only the latest in a series of provocative actions and statements by the Labour government in the face of pickets and protests by road hauliers, farmers and others against high fuel prices. The protests are against fuel costs of 85-90 pence a litre (\$1.25-\$1.32), of which over 70 percent is made up of tax and duties. They were encouraged by the success of similar protests in France last week that forced the Socialist Party-led coalition government of Lionel Jospin to make concessions on fuel prices in the form of subsidies to hauliers, farmers and seamen.

Faced with a serious challenge, Labour has responded with a mixture of arrogance and fear. Scottish Secretary John Reid, the government's official spokesman on the crisis, at

one point even threatened to employ the security services against the protestors.

Labour's singular reliance on repressive measures threatens to provoke a major political crisis. This is a government that has never faced a significant protest movement since it came to power in May 1997. Blair and his co-thinkers have grown accustomed to being able to act with impunity towards working people, shifting the tax burden to their detriment, while slashing social services and benefits. The only voices that found a hearing in Number 10 were those of big business and the media. When it came to the complaints of ordinary working people about their declining living standards, Blair lectured them like a stern father on the need to take their medicine.

Last week, several government spokesmen expressed their disapproval of the "weakness" demonstrated by Jospin in bowing down before "illegal" protests and contrasted this with the alleged respect for the rule of law that was integral to British political life.

In the last four days, they have been forced to think again. The action in France has sparked similar protests throughout Europe. The Belgian capital Brussels has been brought to a standstill for three days. Blockades of roads and refineries have been mounted in the Netherlands, Holland, Norway and Germany. Poland, Italy and Ireland could all see all-out action by road hauliers before the end of the week.

The situation in Britain is by far the most developed. After four full days of blockades on oil depots and refineries, over 3,000 petrol stations have closed. Wales has completely run out of fuel and it is believed there will be none in the country within another 48 hours. Fishermen, whose fuel bills now account for up to 50 per cent of their costs, have joined hauliers and farmers in their action.

The few thousand people directly involved in the action are not actually blocking the routes into fuel depots. They have only been successful because the tanker drivers who take fuel from the depots to filling stations are voluntarily honouring the picket lines. Even motorists interviewed after queuing for hours for petrol have stressed their support.

Even Britain's Conservative opposition have expressed a degree of nervousness about the possibility of open clashes with police and pickets for the first time since the miners' and printers' disputes of the 1980s. There is every indication that such an open show of force would unleash an overwhelmingly hostile reaction from the public. In one sizeable phone poll held Tuesday, 98 percent of respondents said they supported the fuel protests.

The Tories are keen to make political capital out of Blair's difficulties and have demanded the recall of Parliament six weeks early to debate the "national emergency".

But John Redwood MP was not only electioneering when he asked the government to cut petrol prices, and in a reference to the mass protests which played a significant part in the downfall of Tory prime minister Margaret Thatcher in 1990, warned "This is the Labour government's poll tax. They would be wise to give in now before the problem spirals completely out of control."

Labour backbencher Austin Mitchell echoed Redwood's sentiments when he said that a "Churchillian stance of 'we shall never surrender'... is an incentive to take the government on and take Tony Blair on and wipe the smile off his face".

The right wing press, such as the pro-Tory *Telegraph* and the nominally pro-Labour *Sun* newspapers, for their part have made calls for the government to order police action to restore fuel supplies. But they have coupled this with demands that the government signal a retreat on fuel taxes at the same time.

Even the police have been reluctant to act precipitously. Only one or two arrests have been made so far, and one blockade removed. A spokesman for the West Midlands force said: "There is very little we can do, provided the protest is peaceful and the road has not been obstructed. The ball is in the court of the tanker drivers, who do not want to cross picket lines."

Despite these concerns, however, developments point towards an escalation in a dispute of major political significance.

The fuel protest is being led by ad-hoc groups of small businessmen and farmers, with the support of their workforce. Its leaders include Brynle Williams, a sheep and cattle farmer and vice-chairman of the Flintshire branch of the Farmers' Union of Wales, and Richard Haddock, who made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency of the National Farmers Union this year. Their action is from the standpoint of defending the interests of a particular section of industry, rather than out of concern for the broader impact of various forms of regressive sales taxes on millions of working people, of which the duty on petrol is one example.

That a movement of small businesses poses the first major

threat to the Labour government is primarily the result of the abject refusal of the trade union leaders to wage any struggle against the attacks on workers' living standards. Both Blair and the Tories before him have been able to rely on a trade union movement that stands fully behind the interests of big business. The Trades Union Congress isolated and betrayed every major strike of the 1980s, while they integrated themselves into the structures of management and proclaimed an end to industrial conflict in favour of social partnership.

Though Blair has made pains to distance himself from the TUC in order to reassure business of Labour's break with its former constituency in the working class, the TUC itself has undergone a right wing evolution no less dramatic than the party it gave birth to nearly one hundred years ago. With a few major exceptions (adoption of the single European currency the euro being one) the TUC has supported every policy initiative of the government. To date the TUC has not even made an official comment on the fuel protests, let alone sought to advance a campaign in the interests of working people. When this reporter rang their press office to ask the TUC's position, he was told that Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was due to speak at that day's TUC conference in Glasgow and he would probably raise the issue. The press officer clearly saw no reason why the trade union would have a different position to that of the government. In the event, Brown's speech defended the government's policy on fuel and called on the unions to impose pay restraint and boost productivity.

The union most directly involved in the haulage industry is the Transport and General Workers Union. Their response to the fuel protests has been overtly hostile. A September 12 press release calls on their members "to continue working as long as it was safe to do so" and urges "protesters to remove the blockades and allow our members to resume deliveries".

With all the normal avenues through which to protest and express political discontent having been closed to the working class, a Tory opposition in disarray and with business and the mass media generally supportive of his policies, it had appeared to Blair as if he could do no wrong. What the fuel protest reveals is that beneath the surface of events, a well of anger has been building against the government that must inevitably find broader political expression.



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