Britain: government threatens anti-strike laws following fuel tax protests

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Britain's Labour government is proposing legislation to effectively illegalise strike action in broad sectors of the economy, following fuel tax protests by road-hauliers and farmers last week.

For almost a week, tanker drivers who normally deliver supplies of petrol, diesel and heating oil refused to take their lorries out of the depots and refineries past the protesters. Within days, over 90 percent of Britain's filling stations had run dry and the blockade threatened to bring large parts of industry and the public service to a halt.

The government's Fuel Task Force—made up of ministers, oil company executives and the police—was asked to consider legislation to be introduced after the Queen's Speech in November opening the next session of parliament, making oil tanker supplies an "essential service". Similar legislation already covers water, gas and electricity supplies.

An Essential Services Act could be passed to make it a criminal offence to refuse to deliver fuel. The move would seriously undermine the democratic rights of broad layers of working people. The emergency law is expected to bring changes in the way that tanker drivers are hired, forcing them to accept an obligation to deliver fuel in the face of protests. The legislation would outlaw any strike action they took.

The deregulation of Britain's transport sector has led to a significant growth of self-employed owner-drivers, who are sub-contracted to the major haulage companies. It would be difficult to draft a law that would apply to this group, but the proposals seek to offset this by empowering the government to commandeer tankers and by training hundreds of additional soldiers to act as a strikebreaking force.

Oil companies will have a legal duty to maintain supplies—a move prompted by suspicions regarding their collusion with the hauliers and farmers in paralysing Britain's oil and petrol supply network due to their sympathy with demands for cuts in taxation.

The broadening of what constitutes an essential service under emergency powers legislation to include fuel sets a precedent for its extension throughout the public sector. Many other goods and services could henceforth be defined as essential—from foodstuffs to the health and education services—and a ban on industrial action imposed.

A further indication of how the government has responded to the fuel-tax protests by trampling on workers' rights was its decision last week to abandon European safety legislation covering driving hours. This allows lorry drivers to stay at the wheel seven days a week, 10 hours a day for up to 70 hours a week for the next month. The rule change was meant to cover petrol tankers and lorries delivering foodstuffs but applies to all haulage firms, including companies delivering chemicals. One in five road deaths are due to driver fatigue, with an estimated 1,000 deaths a year caused by lorry drivers falling asleep. Tanker drivers must presently receive special training to qualify them to transport their potentially hazardous loads, often carrying 30,000 to 50,000 litres of petrol.

The leaders of some of the major trade unions have made statements opposing the proposed legislation. Bill Morris, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), argued against measures, “that would impinge on the rights of union members to take legitimate lawful action." John Edmonds of the GMB said he could hardly believe the government contemplated banning industrial action in essential services. Even Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had decided against it.

Such expression of surprise notwithstanding, the

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blame for the Blair government's threat to introduce legislation that even Thatcher balked at rests with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliated unions. Of these, moreover, Morris and the TGWU played the most insidious role in the government's campaign against the protests.

Last week's fuel tax protests were carried out by various ad-hoc organisations of small businessmen and farmers. They proved so successful largely due to the massive public support they received from working people who face crippling fuel costs due to the 75 percent rate of tax on every litre bought. Blair and the media believed that their denunciation of similar protests in France as “undemocratic” and “un-British” would swing public opinion in their favour. Instead the actions of the French hauliers and farmers were emulated, becoming a focus of a popular backlash against a government that has slashed taxes for the employers and the rich at workers' expense.

Blair was shown to be lacking a broad social base for his pro-business politics and incapable of any political response other than to threaten state repression against the protests. On Monday September 11 he announced the imminent declaration of a state of national emergency, demanded that police move against the demonstrators and put the army on standby. The press supported Blair's stance, while urging that concessions on fuel taxes be announced at the same time. In contrast, there was almost universal opposition to these measures in the general population.

It was left to the TUC to come to the government's rescue, by providing a political apologia for the threat to break-up the supply depot protests; cajoling tanker drivers into crossing the hauliers and farmers' picket lines.

Morris officially instructed his members to cross the protesters' picket lines and TGWU regional officials were dispatched to enforce this. Union representatives including Morris demanded the arrest of demonstrators. TUC General Secretary John Monks moved a motion at the organisation's conference in Glasgow denouncing the protests as “unconstitutional”, “unlawful” and “a challenge to democracy”. He falsely compared the hauliers and farmers action to the CIA-financed lorry owners' strike in Chile that destabilised the Allende regime and prepared the way for General Pinochet's 1973 coup.

This week, coinciding with the government's announcement of proposed legislation, the TGWU called for a public inquiry to examine whether there had been collusion between the oil companies and protesters during the fuel crisis. It is drawing up a dossier to send to the Prime Minister, which also criticises the police for not moving against the hauliers and farmers. "My members are keen to know why the police failed to use their considerable public order powers to restore safety to the roads," Morris declared. "Why did the companies not invoke their contractual rights in getting deliveries out? Why didn't they take out injunctions? Why did the police not invoke the law of obstruction? Why was a convoy of trucks allowed to occupy all three lanes of the M11 travelling at less than 10mph?"

Such statements express the real position of the TUC regarding Labour's anti-democratic proposals to outlaw strikes and protests. It is the refusal of the TUC to mobilise working people against Labour's attacks that has allowed a popular protest against the government to be dominated by hauliers and farmers in the first place. Morris and his cohorts then used this to justify calls for state repression against a legitimate and popular protest, denouncing it as a “bosses blockade”. Now every measure they have endorsed is to be drafted into law and used against the working class. Despite their muted statements of concern, moreover, the trade union leaders would be more hostile to a mass movement of workers against Blair than they were towards the fuel tax protests. They have shown they are just as willing for the full force of the law to be brought down on their own members, to prop up the Labour government.

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