

British government employs black propaganda and threats against fuel tax protestors

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Britain's political and business elite have made plain that they will not tolerate a renewal of the fuel tax protests which brought the country, and much of Europe, to a standstill in September.

Lorry drivers, hauliers and farmers called off their action against the high rate of fuel tax in Britain—73 percent of pump price—but warned they would restart on November 10 if Chancellor Gordon Brown did not make significant concessions in his mini-budget statement due today. In advance of this deadline ad-hoc groups, the People's Fuel Lobby (PFL) and Farmers For Action, announced a modern-day variant of the Jarrow Crusade—the 1936 unemployed protest from the north east to London—beginning on November 10. Some 25,000 lorries could be involved in the four-day protest, they warned, bringing many motorways and roads to a halt.

The government has used the 60-day respite to prepare for an offensive against the protest—combining military-style contingency plans with black propaganda aimed at undermining widespread public support for the anti-fuel tax campaign.

In Parliament, Armed Forces Minister John Spellar said the government had been "prudently and contingently" training 1,000 troops to take over driving oil tankers if civilian drivers were unable, or unwilling, to deliver fuel. Home Secretary Jack Straw said that the plan was part of a strategy drawn up between police, trade unions and oil companies to "protect essential supplies and services". Drivers could lose their operating licences if they participate in protests deemed to be in breach of the law, whilst the vehicle inspectorate could use new legislation to impound the vehicles of unlicensed operators.

The government has also agreed that the police must take a "hardline" with protestors, empowering them to direct hauliers off main roads or bar them from central London. Those deliberately trying to disrupt the flow of traffic with their vehicles—either through blockades or a "go-slow"—would also face legal action.

Straw said that, "The right to argue, to complain, and to protest is an essential feature of our democratic society. Preventing law abiding people from going about their business and threatening the well-being of the country is not."

The tough measures are in response to complaints that the government was taken by surprise by the last protest. The trade unions have been the most forthright advocates of stiffer policing measures against the protestors. They have attempted to dress their demands as a plea for "fairness" and a "level playing field". Just as the Conservative government was prepared to use brute force against the miner's strike during 1984/85, so they demand that Labour must be

seen to act against the fuel protestors—a kind of "equality of state repression".

The Transport and General Workers Union, which organizes many workers in the haulage industry, had called for an inquiry into the "softly-softly approach" of police during the previous protest. It played a major role in drawing up the contingency plans now being prepared by Blair.

The unions had justified their opposition to the initial protest by drawing comparisons between the anti-fuel tax protestors and the CIA-backed military coup in Chile, which overthrew the social democratic Allende government and brought General Pinochet to power in 1973. According to the unions, the Blair government is a popular left-wing administration under threat from right wing extremists.

The problem with this scenario is that it cannot address why public sympathy was overwhelmingly on the side of the protestors.

Britain's high level of indirect taxation is part of a policy of redistributing wealth away from working class people towards the rich. Whilst taxes on essential items such as fuel have risen exponentially under both the Conservative and Labour administrations—falling especially hardest on poorer families—there have been systemic cuts in corporate and wealth taxes.

To divert attention from this basic issue, in the last weeks the government, trade unions and Blair's supporters in the media have stepped up their attacks on the protest as a right wing threat to democracy.

The pro-Blair *Mirror* newspaper complained that "these pickets are the right-wing equivalent of the wildcat strikers who were once such a threat to British industry", whilst the *Guardian* editorialised that "hauliers are an interest group" seeking to subvert public policy by "restraining trade and blocking highways: in other words, by fomenting anarchy." In response, the paper demands that Blair "should stand back and let the state do what it exists to do—maintain good order and protect weaker citizens from the depredations of the strong".

The right wing press has also made clear their opposition to the fuel-tax protest. Whilst agreeing with the "protesters gripes", the tabloid *Sun*, for example, warned that "The time to protest is at the ballot box—not the picket line. We live in a democracy. The *Sun* does not advocate mob rule".

The press has run several articles apparently detailing plans by the fascist British National Party (BNP) to play "an undercover role" in the threatened protests. According to the media, "Britain's largest neo-fascist group" has warned their members not to "take any BNP literature or mention their political affiliation in earshot of reporters or

police officers" when participating in the protests. Other articles have pointed out links between some prominent members of the PFL and the Conservative Party. According to John Edmonds, General Secretary of the GMB union, comparisons between the fuel protestors and the original Jarrow marchers are "offensive", because the latter were "working people fighting for jobs and decent pay and conditions...not employers simply seeking to increase their own profits."

In addition, Straw released several reports detailing "documented cases" in which civilian tanker drivers had faced harassment—ranging from verbal abuse to physical intimidation—by protestors and drawing attention to the damaging impact the actions have had on the economy.

Much of the government's propaganda is contradictory. On the one hand it has described the high fuel taxes as a "green measure" aimed at protecting the environment. This has assured them the support of many environmental and Green organizations such as Friends of the Earth, who's Executive Director Charles Secrett denounced the protestors as "selfish men" holding the nation and the environment to ransom.

On the other hand, the government has claimed that high levels of indirect taxation are necessary to finance essential public services such as pensions and health care. The 26.2p cut in fuel taxes across the board will jeopardise public spending they claim. In the same breath, however, the government warns of a threat to its "democratic mandate" not to increase direct taxes.

The anti-fuel tax protest contains many disparate elements, including not a few current and former Conservative supporters in its ranks. But if the presentation of the movement as universally extreme right in orientation was true, why then would the British National Party even need to consider mounting a covert infiltration of the protests? On at least one occasion, BNP members were driven off one of the fuel depot pickets in the northeast.

Claims that the protests are a "Tory conspiracy" are equally without foundation. In fact, they result more from the complete inability of the Conservative Party to defend those layers of the middle class that formerly made up its political base. The Conservatives have not been able to reap the benefits of Labour's declining popularity because they have also had to make it clear that they would not be prepared to make concessions in the face of similar protests. Conservative Party leader William Hague said that, "Protests that involve direct action, that are not peaceful, that are not legal or that cause suffering to hard-working families will rightly lose the support of the public."

An objective examination of the line up of social forces surrounding the argument over fuel taxes reveals a very different picture to that portrayed by the government and its media apologists. Most of those directly involved in the protests are self-employed or small businessmen from those sections of industry and agriculture who are barely turning a profit and in most instances are struggling to survive. Along with many working people, they have faced even greater hardship under the Blair government. Labour froze public spending during its first years in office, whilst increasing the level of indirect taxation in order to satisfy the demands of the major corporations.

The political agenda of certain members of the PFL notwithstanding, public support for the protest represented a nascent hostility to Labour's pro-big business agenda, which has increased the gap between rich and poor.

In contrast, the government has won the support of those sections of the corporate elite and the upper middle class—including the trade

union functionaries and many journalists—who have been the real beneficiaries of its policies.

Whilst some sections of big business are sympathetic to a targeted cut in fuel duty, they are alarmed at the protestors' demands for a higher level of taxation on more profitable businesses. Following last month's announcement by Shell that it had made a record profit of £2bn in the last three months, some protestors had demanded a special "windfall tax" on the oil companies to help cut the levels of indirect taxation.

That is why big business has made clear its support for the government's hardline against the fuel protestors. Digby Jones, director general of the Confederation of British Industry, said it had caused "immeasurable damage" to the country and, if repeated, would threaten food supplies, jobs and investment by overseas firms. Jones, who revealed that the CBI had been working "behind the scenes" with the government over the last weeks, also praised the "constructive working relationship" established between Labour and the CBI and the former's sound economic policies.

During the last protest, Jones had proposed setting up a lobby group to campaign for a targeted reduction in fuel taxes, including the CBI, the Society of Motor Manufacturers, haulage companies and others. But according to reports, Jones withdrew after the "big oil companies in the CBI opposed the move, believing that it would put undue pressure on the government". A similar split has opened up with the Road Hauliers Association, which has opposed the planned action, having been convinced it can find some accommodation with the government on fuel duty that will not undermine their favoured pro-business fiscal policy.

Behind the rhetoric of the government, trade unions and the media is one fundamental calculation—nothing must encroach on the "natural" running of the market economy. Of all the various analogies that have been bandied around over recent weeks, the only one that approaches something like the truth is that made between Blair and the fuel-tax protests and Thatcher and the miners. Yes, there is a difference between striking workers and road hauliers and farmers. But there is no difference between the attitude of Thatcher and Blair to those who, for any reason, dare to challenge the dictates of the market or the absolute right of government to impose policies that are detrimental to the well being of the vast majority of working people. That is why the fuel tax protestors are being decried as the new "enemy within", as the Tories once dubbed Britain's colliers. For this reason the threats of repression now being leveled against the anti-fuel tax protestors should serve as a warning to every worker of the contempt in which Britain's rulers hold the basic democratic right to protest.



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