

London Mayor Ken Livingstone joins witchhunt of May Day protestors

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A major witch-hunt has been mounted by Britain's press and TV stations against many of the groups and individuals planning to take part in today's May Day demonstration in London. Its purpose is to justify a priori any repressive actions the police may take. There have been reports of police threatening to use rubber bullets on demonstrators and plans to establish some kind of no go area between "genuine" demonstrators and "anarchists" so that only the latter get shot at.

The police claim that anarchist groups have drawn up a list of 200 targets, mainly stores, including McDonald's, Gap and Starbucks and are also planning to attack other targets such as the Queen's bank Couttes, government buildings and rail stations. Police say the main protest is expected to be a mass looting of prominent stores, the "Sale of the Century", when thousands of protesters descend on a pre-planned rendezvous point at Oxford Circus in the late afternoon.

Assistant Commissioner Michael Todd is in charge of the Metropolitan Police operation. Police have declared a "zero tolerance" approach to any criminal acts at this year's event, which is expected to be attended by 5,000 people including an estimated 1,000 committed activists. All leave has been cancelled and at least 5,000 officers will be on the streets. Litter bins, construction site equipment and anything that can be used as missiles are being removed. Complementing this, businesses are preparing to deploy a private army of security guards to take on potential rioters, with dozens of stores in the West End and the City recruiting extra security staff to protect their premises. Police headquarters at Scotland Yard said it was aware stores were recruiting extra guards and warned them not to arm themselves in any way. There are last-ditch contingency plans to evacuate Oxford Street in the case of major violence and rioting.

Leading the press attack on the demonstration is the London's *Evening Standard*. Its April 24 edition dedicated four and a half pages to the preparations for the May Day demonstrations. It published the photographs of 25 people who are "wanted" by the police and who were supposedly photographed during last year's demonstration. Thousands of photographs and miles of video footage of rioters were taken at the time, which allowed police to identify and mop up many of them in the weeks following the attacks. A large crowd of peaceful demonstrators had been detained in Trafalgar Square for up to five hours.

Depicted as "London's most wanted suspects" and dubbed "Rent-A-Mob", many of the 25 are said to be foreign "awayday" rioters—anarchists living outside London who travel in to cause damage. At least three of those photographed are identified as members of Turkish communist organisations. In order to whip up xenophobia, the *Standard* notes that on one day last year, seven out of 11 people who appeared in court charged with offences at the riot last year held foreign passports. Many are of "no fixed abode", either living in squats or at established protest camps at airports or proposed roads. "Foreign rioters" may even have fled abroad, the paper adds, returning to Britain only to carry out high profile, attention-grabbing stunts.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone chose the *Standard* to make his own denunciation of the protest. Livingstone assures Londoners that he agrees with the stated aims of the demonstration—the cancellation of Third World debt and the eradication of poverty; a halt to the privatisation of the London Underground rail network and an end to environmental pollution. But he then calls on Londoners to avoid the demonstration itself, before giving his reasons for doing so.

The "right to peacefully protest is one of the most

important we possess", he writes, and "If there were an attempt to limit this right then Londoners, and the police, know that I would be one of the first to defend it."

However, "on 1 May we are faced not with an attempt to exercise the peaceful right to protest but by a deliberate attempt by small groups of people to promote violence and destruction of property in London."

Unlike the Anti-Apartheid Movement, CND, the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act and others, the organisers of the "May Day Monopoly" have not contacted the police because their intention is to "maximise violence or disorder". Moreover the "stickers produced to be used in Piccadilly Circus with the slogan 'revolutionise your consumer rights—take the lot' are clearly aimed at smashing in shop fronts", he adds. "I know from my own experience last year that these protests are a tool against those who support peaceful protest or oppose Third World debt. Regardless of my frequently stated opposition to the protests, *The Sun* announced that 'a vote for Ken is a vote for them', next to a picture of a defaced Winston Churchill statue."

Finally Livingstone makes his support for arrests and police sweeps known. "I have met the Commissioner of the Police for a full briefing on the planned May Day events... Anyone whose intention it is to engage in criminal activities should be arrested and charged. In particular, within the law, I would hope that attention will be paid, even before any trouble starts, to those attempting to conceal their identity."

In his radical past, Livingstone may have made a warning about the police using provocations staged by anarchists to step up repressive acts. But his open solidarising with state repression against demonstrators is a shift to the right, even from what he was saying a year ago.

Livingstone did make the comments Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* chose to attack him for. This time last year, Livingstone was campaigning as an independent candidate for the May 4 election to the newly created post of Mayor of London. He was forced to do so because Labour Party leader Tony Blair had carried out a series of underhand manoeuvres in order to exclude his selection to stand for the party. Blair did so because Livingstone was still considered as a pariah figure by

the Murdoch press and some others on the political right because he was leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) up until its abolition by the Thatcher government in 1986. He led campaigns against cuts and in defence of his cheap fare policy on public transport—as well as making statements in support of self-determination for Ireland. This was enough to make "Red Ken" a bogeyman for the right. Livingstone had also advanced himself as a critic of the worst excesses of the Blair government and so was considered unreliable.

This opinion was not universally held. Many business figures considered him a reliable defender of their interests, whose occasional populist outbursts could be useful in cementing public support for measures to revitalise the capital. For workers disillusioned with Labour and opposed to the dictatorial style of Blair's rule over the party, Livingstone seemed the best of a bad bunch. Livingstone tried to straddle both constituencies, so he still felt the need to bang the radical drum to play to popular sentiment. In an interview with the *New Musical Express*, therefore, he chose to express support for the anti-World Trade Organisation protest in Seattle and tell the paper's young readership that global capitalism kills more people every day than Hitler.

The balancing act worked and Livingstone swept to power with 39 percent of the vote as against 27.1 percent for the Tories and just 13.1 percent for Labour's official candidate Frank Dobson. Livingstone has spent the past year trying to build bridges back to the Labour Party and cultivating his relations with the City financiers and corporate concerns. The last thing he needs is for his ill-chosen rhetoric of yesteryear to return to haunt him and stymie his pitch. To prevent this, Livingstone this time chosen the *Standard* to go out on a limb once more on the subject of anti-global capitalism protesters. This time, he does so as a champion of law and order and an apologist for the curtailing of democratic freedoms.



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