

Britain: Labour Party suspends MP George Galloway for antiwar stance

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On May 6 Labour Party General Secretary David Triesman announced that he had suspended George Galloway from the party due to remarks the Scottish Member of Parliament (MP) had made opposing the war against Iraq.

Triesman said an internal investigation would establish whether the MP had brought the party into “disrepute” by urging British troops not to obey “illegal orders” and accusing Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush of acting like wolves.

Galloway, one of the most prominent spokesmen for the Stop the War coalition, had been attacked as a traitor by the right-wing media and most of the political establishment for his remarks. In an interview with Abu Dhabi television at the beginning of April, he suggested that Blair’s pursuit of an illegal war could lead him to be tried for war crimes, and said, “The best thing British troops can do is to refuse to obey illegal orders.”

Following the US-led attack on Iraq, Galloway said, “[T]wo of the world’s richest and powerful leaders had fallen like wolves upon one of the most wretched countries on earth.”

Notwithstanding our fundamental political differences with Galloway, the *World Socialist Web Site* unconditionally defends him against the attack launched by the Labour Party leadership against him. Galloway’s political career has been marked by the opportunism that is typical of the left wing of the Labour Party, and he has, on occasion, gone beyond defence of the Iraqi people to imply political support for the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein. He does not represent a principled, socialist opposition to British imperialism. These differences can and should be discussed at greater length in the future, but on the issue at hand, the basic question is a gross violation of democratic rights aimed at silencing opposition to Blair’s war-mongering policies and intimidating political dissent in general.

The decision to suspend the MP is an unprecedented attack on freedom of speech and due process, even by the Blair government’s standards. Labour has essentially decreed that an elected representative has no right to speak his or her

mind if it runs contrary to the party’s official position. The flouting of any notion of parliamentary democracy and accountability was further underscored by the fact that the disciplinary action was apparently taken by Triesman without consultation with Galloway’s fellow MPs.

The statements for which Galloway has been suspended were entirely principled and true. Given the illegal and unprovoked character of the US-British invasion, his advice to British soldiers not to obey illegal orders was entirely in line with the letter and spirit of international law. It is not Galloway who is bringing the Labour Party into disrepute in the eyes of millions of working and oppressed people around the world, but rather Blair, Triesman and the political reactionaries and cowards who either lined up behind the war or sought in the aftermath to make their peace with the Blair leadership.

Galloway is being attacked for voicing sentiments shared by broad sections of the British public, including millions who marched and demonstrated against the war. Blair made plain his contempt for public opinion, when in the run-up to the war he blithely dismissed the two million-strong antiwar protest in London on February 15, and insisted that “history” would be his judge, as opposed to the electorate.

Now contempt has been replaced by an active suppression of dissenting views that will not stop with Galloway. His fate is meant to intimidate all opponents of the government, both within the party and in the population at large.

Galloway’s suspension, which was immediate and indefinite, bars him from holding party office or publicly representing the party pending the outcome of the investigation. He is still required to vote with the party in parliament, however.

It is doubtful that Labour can make the specific charge against Galloway stick. Not even Labour’s latest variant of the party constitution could officially outlaw free speech.

Moreover, branding Galloway a traitor for his remarks would raise many questions, given the fact that his description of the war as “illegal” is the opinion of many experts in international law. This month Clare Short resigned

as international development secretary, charging that Blair had suppressed a report from the attorney general that raised concerns over the legality of a war undertaken without UN backing. Focusing an attack on Galloway on this issue could well backfire.

Nevertheless, the government has been emboldened to act because of the ongoing media witch-hunt against the MP, seeking to destroy his credibility and force him out of the public arena. Ever since the war against Iraq was ended, there have been a series of allegations made against Galloway charging him with being in the pay of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Last month *Daily Telegraph* journalist in Iraq David Blair alleged that he “stumbled” across several documents during a trawl of the ruins of the Iraqi Information Ministry in Baghdad that indicate that Galloway had received more than £375,000 a year from Iraq’s “Oil for Food” programme.

Blair claims to have found the files intact as he searched a “heap of grubby box files” on the floor of the bombed-out ministry, while looters “scurried through the corridors.”

Subsequently, the *Christian Science Monitor* in the United States claimed to be in possession of documents proving that Galloway had received £6.3 million from Saddam Hussein. The documents were said to have been found by an unnamed Iraqi general in a house used by Saddam’s son, Qusay.

Galloway has launched libel action against both papers, claiming the documents were either forgeries or contained false information.

He has also rejected the charge of financial wrongdoing over the Mariam Appeal he set up to fund the treatment of a little Iraqi girl who contracted leukaemia. The *Times of London* newspaper, amongst others, alleges that, having secured Mariam’s treatment, Galloway used funds to conduct a political campaign against sanctions and in support of the Palestinian *intifada*. The Labour Party’s attorney general had already announced that he would conduct a “fact-finding” probe into the *Times*’ allegations.

Others have also questioned the veracity of the document “finds”, especially why such important documents had not been recovered first by British or US forces, and how they had managed to remain intact given the extensive damage caused by US bombs and the widespread looting that followed.

A May 11 report in the *Mail on Sunday* disclosed that documents it had been offered for sale in Iraq implicating Galloway with the regime were clearly forgeries. The documents were being sold in Baghdad by a former Republican Guard general, Salah Abdel Rasool, and contained obvious mistakes, the newspaper reported. These included glaring misspellings of Iraqi officers’ names, errors in the official title of Saddam’s son Qusay—said to have

authorised the document—and the fact that the signature that was supposed to be Galloway’s bore no resemblance to the MP’s.

According to Roy Greenslade, former editor of the *Daily Mirror*, it is likely that Galloway is the victim of a state-inspired frame-up, designed to destroy his credibility and wreck his political career.

Greenslade would be more familiar than most with such a put-up job, for, as he admits in his article in the May 8 *Guardian*, he was central to such an operation against National Union of Mineworkers leader Arthur Scargill in 1990. As editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Greenslade had accused Scargill of using money raised during the yearlong miners strike—allegedly donated by Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi—to pay off his house mortgage. Further allegations of financial impropriety followed, all involving various pariah regimes and countries.

“It was open season on the president of the National Union of Mineworkers for weeks afterwards. Papers could, and did, say whatever they liked.” The principle, Greenslade wrote, was to throw as much mud as possible in the hope that some of it would stick.

Year’s later Greenslade realised he had “been duped by a secret service plot” to defame the miners’ leader, and that none of the allegations were true.

“The similarities between the Scargill and Galloway cases are so pronounced it’s impossible not to believe that the next stage in the Galloway saga, even if it takes place long into the future, will eventually end up echoing the Scargill affair.”

Labour has made clear that its investigation into the MP will take account of the media allegations against him. Given that these allegations are subject to separate investigations—including a possible court case—this is a telling example of Labour’s readiness to ignore the presumption of innocence without proof of guilt that is one of the most fundamental democratic rights.

In a sign that Labour intends to step up its campaign against the MP as a means of intimidating any opposition to its policies, a meeting that Galloway was due to address in Oxford on May 16 was cancelled by the local authorities on a technicality. But Oxford Labour Councillor Mick McAndrews spelt out the real objective, claiming that Galloway should not be allowed a “public platform on which to spread his anti-British message.”



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