

Answer British Terrorism Bill with a class-based defence of democratic rights

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
11 November 2005

The Socialist Equality Party calls on working people to respond to the passing of the Terrorism Bill by politically mobilising in defence of democratic rights.

No one should be disarmed by the media's exclusive focus on Prime Minister Tony Blair's failure to secure 90 days detention without charge, or fooled by the claim that this represents a victory for parliamentary democracy. The rebellion by 49 Labour MPs and the vote against the provision by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats inflicted a significant personal defeat on Blair. But of far greater significance is the fact that the bill was passed and that MPs voted for an amendment doubling the duration that terror suspects can be held without charge from 14 days to 28.

This, and the failure of MPs to oppose any of the bill's other measures, serves as a warning that there exists no genuine constituency for democratic rights within the ruling establishment.

Whatever their reservations over 90 days detention, the entire political elite has taken a major step towards establishing the legal framework of a police state. This is because the essential driving force behind the adoption of such dictatorial methods is not the threat of terrorism. It is the necessity of imposing policies designed to enrich a privileged few at the expense of the vast majority of working people.

Neither the government nor the opposition parties are capable of securing a popular mandate for the pro-business agenda they all share. Hence, their response to the inevitable growth of social and political dissent is the resort to repression.

The Terrorism Bill builds on some 200 pieces of anti-terror legislation already enacted. In addition to extending the period of internment without trial, the new legislation criminalises the mere expression of opinion deemed unacceptable by the Home Secretary and makes illegal the "glorification of the preparation or commission of terrorist acts"—an offence so vague that it enables the government to arbitrarily outlaw political dissent.

Even in its amended form, the detention of terrorist suspects is in breach of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, and contravenes the essential provisions of British law, enshrined in the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679, which in turn ultimately rests upon the Magna Carta of 1215.

The bill establishes a legal precedent that has far reaching implications. Britain has no written constitution and the rights enjoyed by its citizens exist only to the extent that Parliament has not ruled to the contrary. If these rights can be denied to any group in society, this has ramifications for everyone.

The Blair government adopted an amended version of the European Convention on Human Rights as the basis for its own Human Rights Act. It has now declared that this will be bypassed if it is found to conflict with the proposed legislation. This has been coupled with the threat that no opposition will be tolerated from the judiciary.

The anti-terror legislation is the centrepiece of wider measures already passed or being prepared by the government to curtail civil liberties,

including the right to remain silent, free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, the rights to organise and to peacefully protest.

The police have already been empowered to act as judge, jury and executioner. It was only when an innocent Brazilian man, Jean Charles de Menezes, was murdered by plainclothes police on the London Underground on July 22 that police disclosed the existence of a secret shoot-to-kill policy adopted two years before—again using the pretext of combating terror. But within weeks police spokesmen declared that shoot-to-kill was in force in a variety of situations.

Just as the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction provided a false pretext for defying international law and going to war, so too does terrorism provide an excuse for measures abrogating the rights of everyone in Britain.

The fact that Britain faces a terror threat is entirely the responsibility of the government, which by joining the illegal war against Iraq has destabilised the Middle East and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions within the UK. And the measures employed to supposedly fight this threat will only further endanger the security of the British people by fuelling the sense of injustice that gives rise to terrorism.

More fundamentally, they give the government and the state carte blanche to resort to the type of repressive methods used to deadly effect against de Menezes. As has been demonstrated again and again—in Iraq, in Guantánamo Bay, Belmarsh Prison and on the streets of Britain—this constitutes the gravest threat to the life and liberty of the British people.

Historically, the central democratic rights concern has been to safeguard the individual citizen from arbitrary action by the state—as the most powerful force in the land. In contrast, the bill makes the civil liberties of British citizens dependent on the say-so of the police and security services. In the process, fundamental democratic rights have been recast as a trade-off between the rights of minorities as opposed to the security of the majority. But if democratic and legal rights are not universal, then they no longer exist in any meaningful sense.

The government has accused anyone opposing its measures of elevating the rights of terrorists above national security and defying the security services and the police. On the basis of such scaremongering, it is seeking powers that go beyond anything enacted during the Second World War, when Britain faced a genuine threat to its survival. Aside from the war years, the only precedent to be found for many of the measures now being proposed is the response by the British state to the civil war in Northern Ireland. The government is acting as if it is preparing to wage a civil war against its own people.

Blair has rejected the charge that the new measures could potentially result in the internment of thousands of people without trial, by arguing that at present the legislation would probably affect less than 20 people, according to the police.

This claim exposes the fallacious character of the prime minister's arguments. On the one hand, he claims that the threat from terrorism is so great that it justifies overturning the historic foundations of British law.

On the other, he says that this threat arises from just a handful of people. The truth is that the police can now intern anyone they want to, without any evidence offered or a charge being made.

How is the government's appetite for ever more repressive legislation to be explained?

Blair himself has declared that Britain is on a war footing, necessitating a permanent state of emergency. He is not simply referring to a supposed war on terror.

This is a government that has already plunged Britain into three major military actions, in the former Yugoslavia, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now it is making bellicose threats against Iran and Syria. The aim of this turn to militarism, in alliance with the Bush administration, is to seize control of the world's major oil deposits and strengthen the hand of America and Britain against their major rivals.

The resort to repression is integral to this neo-colonial strategy. Blair was able to ignore the millions who demonstrated against the Iraq war, thanks to the refusal of the leadership of the antiwar movement to politically challenge his government. But that will not always be the case. While the bill's proposal to outlaw any expression of support for those involved in armed struggle against Britain and its allies may initially fall most heavily on British Muslims, it represents a pre-emptive strike against any and all opposition to its imperialist foreign policy.

The same considerations of enriching a tiny privileged elite dictate the government's domestic policy and necessitate the criminalising of political and social opposition at home.

Many of the proposals contained in the anti-terror legislation are deliberately vague and could be applied to strikes, as well as a variety of political demonstrations and protests. Terrorism is said to constitute serious damage to persons or property with the aim of influencing or intimidating the government (including international institutions of government) or public to an ideological, political or religious end.

These powers are being enacted in tandem with proposed legal measures targeting anti-social behaviour. When Blair declared that the "rules of the game" had changed in the struggle against terrorism, he linked this to an attack on "Dickensian" laws that he argued could no longer preserve social order.

He complained, "The whole of our system starts from the proposition that its duty is to protect the innocent from being wrongly convicted.... But surely our primary duty should be to allow law-abiding people to live in safety. It means a complete change of thinking."

Having already enacted Anti-Social Behaviour Orders that allow the police to restrict movement and impose curfews, the government has announced that local authorities will be given the right to confiscate the homes of unruly tenants and that police will be able to impose on-the-spot fines.

Blair has stressed that his anti-terror and law-and-order agenda is bound up with his policies of "changing" Britain, i.e., his government's privatisations and cuts in health, pension and welfare provision. Such "reforms" are "tough," Blair said, and require new approaches. What he means is that Parliament, the judiciary and the police must be prepared to meet growing resistance to measures that impoverish millions.

It is this agenda that accounts for the extraordinary political coalition assembled by Blair in support of his proposals.

Blair formed an open alliance with the highest echelons of the police service, threatening MPs that they were either with the police or against them in the war against terror. In return, senior police commanders, including Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, publicly backed the prime minister.

The other major supporter of Blair and his 90-day proposal was Rupert Murdoch's News International. Its flagship newspaper, the *Sun*, denounced MPs as "traitors" and said that the prime minister was "absolutely right."

Murdoch is the archetypal representative of the international financial oligarchy politically represented by the Blair government. Notwithstanding the cheap populism employed by the *Sun*, the interests of this layer are diametrically opposed to those of the broad mass of the population in Britain and internationally.

Their fabulous wealth has been accrued through their ability to exploit global markets and resources. In return for their investments, they demand of all national governments that they impose wage cuts, speed-ups, slash corporate taxes and gut public services and welfare provisions.

The resulting gulf between the rich and the poor all over the world has become so vast that it demands a turn to police repression and ever more dictatorial forms of rule. That is why the debate on the anti-terror bill took place against a background of social unrest throughout France and the imposition of a state of emergency by the Chirac government. And why in Australia the Howard government is pushing through a terror bill almost identical to that of the Blair government.

These political realities must determine the methods and programme upon which the attack on civil liberties must be fought.

No confidence can be placed in any section of the ruling establishment, including the judiciary, to oppose the government's authoritarian policies. Sections of the ruling elite are worried at the possible repercussions of Blair's actions, but whatever their qualms the ruling class is being driven into a head-on confrontation with the working class.

Democratic rights can only be secured through the independent mobilisation of workers, youth and students against the Labour government and all the political representatives of big business.

Historically, the extension of democratic rights to the working class was only accomplished through mass political action. Workers only won the right to vote after decades of struggle beginning with the Chartist movement in the 1830s, and universal suffrage was only finally secured in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Equally the right to organise in trade unions necessitated the defeat of concerted legal attacks and culminated in a political break with the Liberals and the formation of the Labour Party.

This raises the central task in the development of an effective movement to defend democratic rights—the building of a new and genuinely socialist party.

It is precisely because the working class has been effectively politically disenfranchised by the degeneration of its old organisations that the ruling class has been able to impose one attack after another on democratic rights and living standards. The trade unions no longer defend even the most basic interests of their members and have presided over an unbroken series of defeats stretching back to the miners' strike of 1984-85. And since coming to power in 1997, the party built by workers to defend their interests—Labour—has become the direct instrument of social and political reaction.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a programme for the abolition of the profit system in favour of one based on production for need. Only through the struggle for genuine socialist equality and an end to class oppression can democratic rights be defended and the drive to militarism and colonialism defeated.



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