

Police ban London antiwar march

New attack on democratic rights

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The Metropolitan Police have banned a demonstration by the Stop the War Coalition in central London. Police spokesmen have indicated that this is in response to pressure from the Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

The march is planned to coincide with the reopening of Parliament on Monday October 8. This is a major attack on the freedom of speech. It must be condemned and opposed by all workers, young people and socialist-minded intellectuals.

The ban marks an escalation of the Labour government's 10-year assault on democratic rights. Not content with the mass of recent legislation to curb the right to free speech, it has turned to anti-democratic legislation dating back to the nineteenth century.

The march has been banned under a little-known law dating from 1839, at the time of the Chartist movement—a period that was to encompass class conflict at home and colonial insurrections abroad. It was a time when the British ruling class believed they were on the brink of social revolution—a fear which was to be confirmed by the 1848 revolutions that toppled thrones in Europe and gave birth to the Marxist movement.

The bourgeoisie weathered a storm that lasted from 1837, when the Charter was published and launched the first working-class movement, to 1858, when the “Indian Mutiny” or first War of Indian Independence was bloodily crushed. By a combination of violence and economic concessions, the capitalist class was able to maintain its hold on power.

The use of such legislation indicates that the representatives of capital once again fear a threat to their rule. In today's economic climate, the ability of British capitalism to make the kind of economic concessions it made when it exercised undisputed world hegemony is severely limited. All that is left is its monopoly of violence, which it will not hesitate to use if it faces opposition to its fundamental interests.

Still on the statute book, the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 allows Parliament to renew a Sessional Order annually that instructs the police to prevent any obstruction to Members of Parliament or the House of Lords going about their business. The order can be applied to the public streets in the vicinity of the Houses of Parliament, “Her Majesty's palaces”, “the public offices”, the courts, theatres, and “other places of public resort”.

The order allows the police to break up demonstrations and disperse crowds on any day that the Houses of Parliament are sitting. It could be applied to a demonstration anywhere within London that might be interpreted as hindering MPs and Lords

from travelling to Parliament.

Since August 1, 2005, spontaneous demonstrations have been banned in a wide area of central London under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCP Act 2005). This act created an exclusion zone within a one kilometre radius of the Houses of Parliament. A large part of central London is covered by the exclusion zone. It takes in St James's Park, an extensive area of the South Bank, and a swathe of London from Charing Cross to Lambeth Bridge.

In December 2005 Maya Evans became the first person to be convicted under the SOCP Act 2005, when she read out the names of British soldiers who had been killed in Iraq. Her companion, Milan Rai, who read out the names of Iraqi civilians who had died, was found guilty of breaching the act in April 2006. The site of their protest, the Cenotaph war memorial, falls within the exclusion zone.

Even that act was not enough for Brown. The government's use of the Sessional Order effectively extends this already widespread ban to the whole of London. Potentially even a rally in Trafalgar Square could be covered by the Sessional Order if it is deemed to impede MPs and Lords from travelling through London. Trafalgar Square is the traditional location for political meetings and is not part of the exclusion zone.

Under the SOCP Act 2005 any one wishing to demonstrate within the exclusion zone must apply in writing for permission. Even if approval is granted the demonstration may be subject to restrictions such as a ban on the use of megaphones, a change in route, or time limits.

The organisers of the march on Monday, October 8 had applied for and been granted permission. Their route from Trafalgar Square to the Houses of Parliament had been approved. On arrival at the House of Commons, they intended to lobby MPs calling for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq.

The fact that the government has responded to a peaceful lobby of Parliament by what was expected to be a relatively small number of people in such a draconian manner must be taken as a warning of the direction in which the government is heading. Brown's administration is set to be even more repressive than that of Tony Blair. It is reaching into every corner of its legal armoury in order to suppress free speech.

Its actions tend to confirm press reports in Britain and the UK that the British government has given its backing to a bombing campaign against Iran. Under these circumstances, and with the

possibility of a snap general election being called, even a modest demonstration calling attention to the government's militarist and colonialist policies is considered anathema.

Brown fears any action that might become a focus for continued mass opposition to war in Iraq, Afghanistan and a possible war against Iran.

Since the mass global antiwar mobilisations of 2003, the Stop the War Coalition has run the antiwar movement into the ground by refusing to tie opposition to war to a political struggle by the working class against the government. Instead everything has been made dependent on what is politically acceptable to a handful of Labour and trade union "lefts" that have made a show of opposing the occupation of Iraq.

Since it became clear that Blair would step down to be replaced by Brown, it has centred its propaganda exclusively on a humble appeal for a change in government policy. In April, even before Brown became prime minister, the Stop the War Coalition was urging him to "Withdraw British troops from Iraq no later than October 2007," "Declare that this country will not participate in any attack against Iran" and "Pursue a foreign policy independent of the administration of the United States of America."

Chair of Stop the War Coalition Andrew Murray, of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, and convenor Lindsey German, of the Socialist Workers Party, admitted in an open letter to their affiliated groups that "Brown has been at the Prime Minister's right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan." "Nevertheless," the letter continued "it is our conviction that mass pressure, combined with electoral self-interest, can force the British government to break from George Bush's wars."

Since then Brown has succeeded Blair as Prime Minister and behind the scenes is preparing for the next phase of a Middle Eastern war that, while it may be led by Washington, is just as much in the interests of the financial oligarchy that dominates Britain.

Despite this record of political cowardice and opportunism, the government clearly has no confidence that its supine leadership will be able to contain the mass upsurge of revulsion that bombing Iran would produce. Brown realises that an extension of the war could see millions on the streets again. The decision to ban Monday's demonstration indicates that his government will meet protests with naked repression.

He will be given a free-hand by Britain's media, which has greeted the ban on the demonstration with near total silence. The coalition's own response to the ban has been similarly low key. Although they have decided to march in defiance of the ban, their response is ludicrously out of touch with the political realities of the situation.

This is epitomised by its president, the former Labour MP and government minister Tony Benn, who will be at the head of the march. He has written to the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announcing his intention to carry a postcard printed with his signature as a Privy Councillor. The postcard will ask the police to assist him. He proposes to hand out copies of this postcard to any other demonstrator who wishes to carry one.

"The authority for this march," Benn writes, "derives from our ancient right to free speech and assembly enshrined in our history,

of which we often boast and which we vigorously defended in two world wars."

Benn makes no mention of the fact that the right to free speech was won by a long history of bitter struggle on the part of working people. Instead he relies on the very institutions that opposed the right of free speech and the extension of the franchise to the mass of the population. His letter appeals to Smith, "I hope that you will be able to re-assure me that those who demonstrate and march down Whitehall will enjoy your full support *and the support of the police.*" [Emphasis added]

To imagine that Benn's status as a privy councillor can be used to defend the marchers on Monday is at best a dangerous illusion. Historically, the Privy Council was the body that advised the sovereign. Even in more recent times it is under the name of the Privy Council that the Prime Minister issues Orders in Council without reference to parliament or public discussion. But Benn's own record as a minister who employed repressive measures against strikers and who established an unaccountable armed force to protect nuclear installations suggests that his reliance on his position in the Privy Council is not the result of political naivety, but rather a desperate attempt to maintain illusions in British parliamentary democracy and to oppose a genuine challenge to the government.

It is indicative of Benn's politics and those who support his leadership of the Stop the War Coalition that on Thursday October 4, just days after the ban was imposed, he announced his desire to be nominated as Labour's candidate for Kensington in west London. Whatever antiwar noises he might make, this is subordinate to his continued loyalty towards a party and a government that has moved in lock step with the Bush administration over Iraq.

For the Stop the War Coalition to pretend that a handful of supposedly left Labourites, such as the octogenarian Benn, can pressurise Brown into ending Britain's war in Iraq, Afghanistan or ending its support for the US over Iran is politically criminal. The only way in which militarism and colonialism and the accompanying attack on democratic rights that is expressed in the ban on Monday's march can be defeated is by a politically independent movement of working class against the Labour government.



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