Britain: Senior police officer warns of “summer of rage”

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A senior officer in London's Metropolitan Police has issued a public warning that Britain could experience a wave of demonstrations and direct-action protests this year as a result of the economic crisis.

Superintendent David Hartshorn, head of the Metropolitan Police's public order branch, told the *Guardian* newspaper that many "middle class" people who had never joined a demonstration could be radicalised, creating "potentially violent mass protests."

Hartshorn claimed that UK intelligence reports point to "known activists" who are "good at motivating people," working to foment protests. Pointing to the inner-city riots in Britain in the 1980s, he claimed that activists today are "intent on coming on to the street to create public disorder." Hartshorn warned that those who lost homes, savings or jobs as a result of the economic crisis might become "foot soldiers" in potentially violent mass demonstrations.

Based on police and security service monitoring of activists' websites, Hartshorn suggested that banks, especially those bailed-out by the government, that still pay large bonuses to executives had become "viable targets" for protesters. Other financial companies and multinational companies associated with the economic crisis were also likely to be hit. He warned that energy companies would be targeted by "hardcore" green groups, drawing on public concerns for the environment:

"All you've got to do then is link in with the environmentalists, and look at the oil companies. They're seen to be turning over billions of pounds profit in issues that are seen to be against the environment."

He was clear that police are preparing to intervene more forcefully in repressing demonstrations. The likelihood of angry mass protests meant that where police previously "would possibly look at certain events and say, ‘yes there'll be a lot of people there, there'll be a lot of banner waving, but generally it will be peaceful,' [now] we have to make sure these elements don't come out and hijack that event and turn that into disorder."

"Obviously the downturn in the economy, unemployment, repossessions, changes that. Suddenly there is the opportunity for people to mass protest," he said. According to the *Guardian*, Hartshorn believed that recent demonstrations had shown that more people were "intent on coming on to the streets to create public disorder."

In particular, Hartshorn identified the April meeting in London of leaders of the G20 group of major economies as a rallying point for these "known activists." "We've got G20 coming and I think that is being advertised on some of the sites as the highlight of what they see as a ‘summer of rage,' " he said.

Several groups involved in recent protests have complained that police had adopted a more confrontational approach than usual, especially at the large demonstrations against the Israeli assault on Gaza in January.

"[E]xtreme rightwing and extreme leftwing" groups would seek to "use the fact that people are out of jobs," said Hartshorn.

He singled out individuals from the small fascist organisation Combat 18, saying: "They are using the fact that there's been lots of talk about eastern European people coming in and taking jobs on the [London 2012] Olympic sites. They're using those types of arguments to look at getting support."

The ability of fascist groups to carry out such initiatives is made possible by the efforts of the trade unions to divert workers' anger at job losses and pay cuts into the blind alley of economic protectionism, as demonstrated during the "British jobs for British workers" campaign of the Unite and GMB unions at oil refineries and power stations.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the British establishment fears not the provocations of such groups, but the re-emergence of a militant leftward movement of workers.

Hartshorn told the *Guardian*: "Potentially there will be more industrial actions.... History shows that some of those disputes—Wapping [1986 printers' strike], the [1984/1985] miners' strike—have caused great tensions in the community and the police have had difficult times policing and

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maintaining law and order."

Writing of the senior police officer's warning, James Slack, Home Affairs editor of the right-wing *Daily Mail*, commented, "Thousands of workers demonstrated in Dublin on Saturday. Police fear the worsening economic situation will lead to mass street protests in the UK.

"Many will consider such a scenario unlikely, or point out this has not been the 'British way' over the past two decades.... But can we really be so sure? The public's rage with the banks and the Government is growing by the day."

There have been large demonstrations across Europe in response to the economic crisis. In Greece, youth rioted and held demonstrations across the country for several days in protest against police brutality and poverty wages. Greek farmers recently also carried out road blocks as a protest against falling agricultural prices. This month, more than a million workers took part in a strike in France against the pro-business policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy, while 120,000 marched on the streets of Dublin in Ireland over rising unemployment and increased pension contributions. In Iceland, whose economy was virtually bankrupted by the financial crisis, there were sustained demonstrations calling for the government to resign, which were met with tear gas from riot police.

Secret police unit

Just days before Hartshorn's statements, news leaked that a new secret police intelligence unit has been established to spy on political and activist groups.

The Confidential Intelligence Unit (CIU) is to operate across the UK, carrying out surveillance and running informers on "domestic extremists." CIU is part of the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), established in 1999.

The new unit will also work with the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, a police operation that, according to its web site, "promotes a coordinated response to domestic extremism by providing tactical advice to the police service, and information and guidance to industry and government."

An alleged early operation for the CIU was the infiltration of groups involved in the January demonstration in London against Israel's war on Gaza. According to the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper, the CIU "aims to identify the ring-leaders behind violent demonstrations such as the recent anti-Israel protests in London, and to infiltrate neo-Nazi groups, animal liberation groups and organisations behind unlawful industrial action such as secondary picketing."

The unit is reputed to have a remit similar to that of the secretive domestic spying agency MI5, including "counter subversion." During the Cold War, MI5 was initially associated with counter-espionage operations against Soviet spies and infiltration of the Communist Party. But it later shifted its focus to the various left groups associated with Trotskyism, including operations in the 1970s and 1980s against the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Media reports assert that MI5 has largely moved its focus from left-wing activities to anti-Islamic terrorist operations over the past decade. This has left the CIU with the task of stepping in to spy on an anticipated new generation of domestic targets.

An internal police job advertisement for the head post in the unit, obtained by the *Mail on Sunday*, gives a taste of the powers the CIU will wield. According to the paper:

"The advert says the unit will work closely with Government departments, university authorities and private sector companies to 'remove the threat of criminality and public disorder that arises from domestic extremism.'

"The CIU will also use legal proceedings to prevent details of its operations being made public."

It is likely that the CIU will work on university campuses with a group established in 2006 by the Association of University Chief Security Officers to tackle "Islamic fundamentalism." The universities group includes officials from the Home Office's counter-terrorism department and the NPOIU. At the time, the Department for Education had prepared plans for university staff to monitor "Asian-looking" and Muslim students and claimed that universities were "a fertile recruiting ground for students."

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