

Britain: Protests and political campaigning redefined as “domestic extremism”

Robert Stevens
29 October 2009

A central feature of the assault on democratic rights in Britain, carried out by the Labour government in the name of the “war on terror,” is its effort to criminalise political activity.

A series of articles in the *Observer* and *Guardian* newspapers reveals that the state and its various spying agencies now define *all* political protest and campaigning as “domestic extremism.”

The National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) was established under Prime Minister Tony Blair in March 1999. It now oversees the operations of the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit (Netcu) and the National Domestic Extremism Team (Ndet).

The three secretive units actively spy on and compile a database of thousands of “domestic extremists.” They also co-ordinate their work with the Confidential Intelligence Unit (CIU), whose existence only came to light in February of this year.

According to the *Guardian*’s research, these three police units are run by the “terrorism and allied matters” committee of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo), which receives “£9m in public funding, from police forces and the Home Office, and employs a staff of 100.” The *Guardian* adds that Anton Setchell “is national co-ordinator for domestic extremism.”

The newspaper comments that the NPOIU “runs a central database which lists thousands of so-called domestic extremists. It filters intelligence supplied by police forces across England and Wales, which routinely deploy surveillance teams at protests, rallies and public meetings. The NPOIU contains detailed files on individual protesters who are searchable by name.”

The *Observer* described the NPOIU files as “essentially a giant database of protest groups and protesters in the country,” whose purpose is “to gather, assess, analyse and disseminate intelligence and information relating to criminal activities in the United Kingdom where there is a threat of crime or to public order which arises from domestic extremism or protest activity.”

Originally targeting “animal rights groups,” NPOIU was expanded in 1999 to “include all forms of domestic extremism, criminality and public disorder associated with cause-led groups.” It contains some information supplied by companies that hire private investigators to spy on protesters, sometimes by infiltration.

Nectu is described by the *Observer* as helping “police forces, companies, universities and other bodies that are on the receiving end of protest campaigns.”

The 16-person-strong unit “works with police forces across the country, keeps detailed files on protest groups, rather than individuals, and liaises with thousands of companies in aviation, energy, research, farming and retail,” the newspaper said, identifying the head of Nectu as Superintendent Steve Pearl.

Ndet was established in 2005 and operates from a central London building, where its focus now includes crime “linked to single issue-type causes and campaigns.”

The role of the Confidential Intelligence Unit as part of the NPOIU is to process “sensitive information from informants in protest groups.”

Redefining of political protest

In the article, “How police rebranded lawful protest as ‘domestic extremism’,” the *Guardian* details the police response to a campaign by environmental protests outside the Drax power station in North Yorkshire in 2006. The protest was held there because the power station is the UK’s largest emitter of carbon.

The newspaper reported that it has obtained internal police papers that described the Drax protest as “the first time domestic extremism took place against national infrastructure in the county.”

The report continues, “The term ‘domestic extremism’ is now common currency within the police. It is a phrase which

shapes how forces seek to control demonstrations. It has led to the personal details and photographs of a substantial number of protesters being stored on secret police databases around the country.”

Noting that “there is no official or legal definition of the term,” the report adds that the police spying network has instead effectively created its own all-embracing definition.

The article continues, “Senior officers describe domestic extremists as individuals or groups ‘that carry out criminal acts of direct action in furtherance of a campaign. These people and activities usually seek to prevent something from happening or to change legislation or domestic policy, but attempt to do so outside of the normal democratic process’.”

Protest by its very definition is based on “preventing something from happening or to change legislation.” The use of this terminology suggests that police agencies are moving to criminalise well-established forms of extra-parliamentary political activity. The definition is so deliberately vague that it could be applied to forms of protest like public meetings, demonstrations, occupations and industrial action.

According to the *Guardian*, the three units divide their activities into four categories: “animal rights campaigns; far-right groups such as the English Defence League; ‘extreme leftwing’ protest groups, including anti-war campaigners; and ‘environmental extremism’ such as Climate Camp and Plane Stupid campaigns.”

The level of surveillance involved is vast and all-encompassing. According to one report, it includes the tracking of vehicles associated with protesters via automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras.

ANPR is being introduced in urban centres across the UK. Described as a “ring of steel,” it is able to record the registration plate number, car colour and entry time of all cars entering a designated area. The information can then be kept by police.

The newspaper cited one example of a man, without any criminal record, who was “stopped more than 25 times in less than three years after a ‘protest’ marker was placed against his car after he attended a small protest against duck and pheasant shooting. ANPR ‘interceptor teams’ are being deployed on roads leading to protests to monitor attendance.”

It continues, “Police surveillance units, known as Forward Intelligence Teams (FIT) and Evidence Gatherers, record footage and take photographs of campaigners as they enter and leave openly advertised public meetings.” These are then added to the central NPOIU files and “entered on force-wide databases so that police can chronicle the campaigners’ political activities.”

While Setchell did not disclose to the *Guardian* how many

names are on the NPOIU’s national database, the report said, “He estimated they had files on thousands of people.”

The article details how “surveillance officers are provided with ‘spotter cards’ used to identify the faces of target individuals who police believe are at risk of becoming involved in domestic extremism.” The movements of “high-profile activists regularly seen taking part in protests” are then continuously monitored.

Setchell commented to the *Guardian* that anybody can now be swept up in such a police dragnet: “Just because you have no criminal record does not mean that you are not of interest to the police. Everyone who has got a criminal record did not have one once.”

Asked to comment on the news reports, Home Secretary Alan Johnson claimed that while he had not issued any guidance to police on the definition of “domestic extremists,” “[T]he police know what they are doing, they know how to tackle these demonstrations, they do it very effectively.”

Animal rights activism was just “one form of domestic extremism,” he continued, adding contemptuously, “if the police want to use that as a term, I certainly wouldn’t fall to the floor clutching my box of Kleenex.”

The reports confirm that under the guise of the “war on terror,” Labour has established the apparatus of a police state. The focus on so-called “domestic extremism” is aimed at silencing the growing social and political opposition that is developing amongst millions of working people in opposition to the official parties and their policies of imperialist war and austerity.

Acpo is reportedly taking a close interest in the ongoing strikes by postal workers. The *Guardian* stated that the association “was closely monitoring the situation and had issued guidance to forces on dealing with large-scale strike action. Each police force is assessing and reviewing the implications for public disorder that might arise from industrial action.”



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)