

Proposed British anti-war march prompts demands for clampdown on rights

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Demands for a further clampdown on democratic rights have been made after an Islamist group suggested it might hold an anti-war demonstration in Wootton Bassett, North Wiltshire.

The small English town has become the scene for almost weekly “repatriation ceremonies,” in which the coffins of soldiers killed in Afghanistan landing at nearby RAF Lyneham are carried by hearse down the main street to a nearby hospital morgue.

Last week, Anjem Choudary, head of Islam4UK, floated the suggestion that his group might organise an anti-war demonstration in the town, featuring 500 coffins to symbolise the thousands of Muslims killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. An open letter on the group’s website, addressed “to the families of British soldiers who have fallen,” said that the floated march was “an attempt to engage the British public’s minds on the real reasons why their soldiers are returning home in body bags and the real cost of the war.”

The proposal has now been withdrawn, after furious denunciations by the establishment parties and the media.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown condemned the very idea as “abhorrent and offensive.” The Wiltshire town had assumed a “special significance” in the life of the nation, which should be respected, he said.

James Gray, Conservative MP for the North Wiltshire constituency that covers the town, said that while “I strongly support the great British respect for free speech and the right to protest,” Choudary should be prevented from exercising such rights in Wootton Bassett.

“Our repatriation ceremonies,” he continued, “are absolutely apolitical. No comment is made about the war, either in favour or against. We simply turn out in all

weathers, and often twice a week, to pay our respects to soldiers who have fallen in service of Queen and country. That’s why we are so opposed to the proposed Islam4UK’s march—it would be hijacking our quiet, simple ceremonies for political purposes.”

This is a lie. There is nothing spontaneous, much less “apolitical” about the Wootton Bassett “ceremonies,” as Gray knows very well, given the role played by the Tories in helping build them into media events.

The parades have assumed a particularly important political function under conditions in which the government, the official parties and the media face the opposition of the majority of people to British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Popular opposition is, in addition, reinforced by the rising death toll of British soldiers—now standing at 150 in Afghanistan alone—most of whom are aged 21 years and under and from some of the most deprived areas of the UK.

It is for this reason, rather than any supposed political neutrality, that “no comment” is made on the war during the parades in Wootton Bassett. Nevertheless, the ceremonies have a determinedly pro-war agenda, albeit one cloaked behind the grieving faces of parents, spouses, siblings and friends as the coffins of their loved one passes by.

Support for “our boys” is now the mantra of the pro-war lobby. The implicit subtext is that this involves not only maintaining but strengthening the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, since this is the only way to keep “our boys” safe.

In reality, any genuine concern for the lives and well-being of those being sent to fight would necessitate the demand for their immediate return and an end to all such colonial adventures. This is especially the case when the number of British fatalities is greatly outstripped by the tens of

thousands of men, women and children killed and maimed over the last years as a result of US and British intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and now Yemen.

Support for “our boys” has thus become the means through which all the official parties, including the Liberal Democrats, have thumbed their noses at anti-war sentiment and rallied behind Britain’s war drive.

It is the violent repression being carried out by the US and the UK in these countries that is the great unmentionable, as far as the ruling class is concerned. The repeated parades of British coffins through Wootton Bassett is not only aimed at silencing criticism of the war in general, but specifically at countering sympathy for the poverty-stricken and oppressed masses who are the chief victims of the revival of imperialist militarism.

Socialists hold no brief for reactionary communalist groups such as Islam4UK. Nevertheless, the hysterical denunciations occasioned by the mere suggestion that they might organise an anti-war protest must be understood as part of a far wider effort to censor and criminalise opposition to the imperialist aggression being carried out by the Western powers across the Middle East and Africa.

This was highlighted yesterday when a court convicted five British Muslim men of “abusive” protest against soldiers returning from Iraq last March. The five were yesterday convicted of “using threatening, abusive, insulting words and behaviour which was likely to cause harassment, alarm and distress to others,” Their supposed crime is that they shouted and waved placards stating, “British soldiers you will pay,” “Baby killers shame on you” and “Shame, shame, shame on you” during an Iraq “homecoming” parade by the 2nd Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment in Luton.

The implication is clear. No criticism of the role of Britain’s armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere is to be permitted on the grounds that it might “distress” some people. In the meantime, the British army and its allies are free to illegally occupy countries and kill and maim their populations, and those rightly offended and outraged by these actions are to remain silent or face prosecution.

Home Secretary Alan Johnson said that a march in the town would be “particularly offensive” and that he would impose a ban on any such demonstration if it were requested. But even that was not enough for some in the media and in the Conservative Party, who want Islam4UK to be placed on the list of proscribed organisations under the Terrorism Act

2006.

Conservative leader David Cameron urged that Choudary’s public statements should be “looked at seriously in terms of the legality of what he’s saying. He strays, I think, extremely close to the line of encouraging hatred, extremism and violence.”

An editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* concurred, stating that “Choudary’s vile rantings against Our Boys are surely illegal.... We have laws to deal with hate crimes. Why aren’t we using them?”

An accompanying article cited “Ex-police chief John O’Connor” opining that British-born Choudary “could even be charged with TREASON—which carries a life sentence—for trying to disrupt the nation’s war effort.”

On Sunday, the *News of the World* claimed an “exclusive” that Johnson was preparing to use anti-terror laws to ban Islam4UK.

“The move will make it a criminal offence—punishable by up to TEN YEARS in jail—to become a member or to attend or address any meetings,” it reported. “It also allows the authorities to tear down websites used by the groups to spread hate, promote violence and recruit new members. The action will also make it a criminal offence to raise funds.”

It should be noted that threats of legal action and censorship were not raised against Nick Griffin, leader of the fascist British National Party when he turned up in a blaze of publicity at one Wootton Bassett ceremony.



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