

The Murdoch scandal

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland**22 July 2011**

For the last few days, the British public has been told that parliament has reasserted authority over Rupert Murdoch's media empire and finally called the multibillionaire to order. Some have gone so far as to exclaim that Murdoch's appearance before a parliamentary select committee Tuesday, alongside his son James, represents a "British Spring".

This implicit reference to the so-called "Arab Spring"—revolutionary working-class struggles that forced Western-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt to resign this winter—is absurd and false. The spectacle of bought-and-paid-for parliamentarians respectfully questioning Murdoch aims to confuse the population and forestall a political accounting with the corporate oligarchy.

Far from demonstrating the vitality of the British political system, the sycophancy of Murdoch's questioners revealed its rottenness and corruption. Prime Minister David Cameron—despite ample evidence of his compromising relations with top personnel from Murdoch's UK media group, News International—did not even face a motion of no-confidence during Wednesday's emergency parliamentary sitting. If there were any commitment to democracy left in the British establishment, this would not be possible.

It is a matter of record that representatives of News International were involved in hacking the phones of over 12,000 people, bribing police officers and using ties to the criminal underworld to blackmail and intimidate leading public figures. Moreover, the disturbing and unexplained death on Monday of the chief whistle-blower, Sean Hoare, was immediately declared "not suspicious".

Every major institution and leading politician is implicated in the Murdoch scandal. Besides their own nefarious relations with Murdoch's media group, top officials of the Metropolitan Police, the Crown

Prosecution Service and successive governments have blocked investigations into criminal behaviour at News International for at least six years.

The ruling establishment's claims of shock and outrage now are rank hypocrisy. Everyone in the political class knew full well the basic character of Murdoch's operations, and either acquiesced or played an active part in them. For three decades Murdoch was a kingmaker, not only in Britain but also in the US, Australia, and beyond. Politicians, whether nominally "conservative" or "labour", pledged fealty to him.

That is why not a single individual has been prosecuted, much less held to political account, in the News International scandal so far.

The political establishment's long-standing ties to Murdoch were not simply based on personal allegiance. He was closely associated with the privatization, deregulation, and rampant speculation that spawned today's parasitic financial oligarchy. The empty sensationalism of news coverage by his media empire played no small role in creating a political and intellectual atmosphere in which this oligarchy proceeded with draconian attacks on the workers, from the 1980s on, without any effective challenge from the working class.

To be sure, Murdoch had opponents and commercial rivals in the ruling class itself. There were long-standing concerns in media and political circles internationally over Murdoch's influence, his media monopoly and ability to dictate government agendas, and even the make-up of government itself.

These rivalries, coupled with fallout from Murdoch's political manoeuvres like his abandoning of Labour under Gordon Brown in 2009 in favour of David Cameron's Conservatives, provided the spark for the present conflict.

With the political crisis that suddenly erupted over criminality at News International in Britain, deeper

conflicts within the ruling elite are coming to the surface. It should be recalled that just before the eruption of outrage over phone hacking at the *News of the World*, International Monetary Fund leader Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested and ousted from his post, based on dubious allegations of sexual assault. As is inevitably the case in such scandals, competing interests are being fought out on far broader political issues.

Thus *Telegraph* editor Benedict Brogan complained, “While Westminster has been transfixed by the hacking saga and its increasingly bizarre twists and turns, the world economy has been edging closer to the precipice. The euro zone is flirting with disintegration, America is contemplating default on its debt, and the banking system is inching closer to another brush with systemic failure.”

Though Brogan implies that the Murdoch “saga” is a distraction, it is rooted in the very crisis he identifies. The 2008 financial crash has undermined the world economy and shattered the political prestige of the capitalist market. As governments demand deep attacks on workers—Cameron’s £100 billion programme of cuts, or the multitrillion cuts to social spending being prepared by the Obama administration in the United States—they face a challenge from the working class.

Past months have seen not only the toppling of dictatorships in the Middle East, but mass protests against social cuts in Britain, the United States, and continental Europe. It is the question of how best to try to contain, dissipate and crush that movement that the ruling class is now debating. Brogan noted that some in ruling circles see the phone hacking scandal “as a useful ‘stress test’ for the far more demanding economic challenges on the horizon. They recognise the flaws in the Downing Street machinery, and want changes to correct them. For if No 10 stumbles so badly in a situation like this, what’s going to happen when things really get ugly?” These sections of the ruling class view Murdoch as a liability, or at least as a figure whose influence has spread too far.

There is a historical parallel with perhaps the most famous political scandal in modern history concerning the influence of one man over the ruling elite. The Russian mystic Grigori Rasputin’s sway over the Tsar and his family led to political intrigues between contending factions within Russia’s elite. Accused of

being an agent of foreign influence over the German-born Tsarina, he was murdered by right-wing nobles in December 1916. A few months later, in the revolution of February 1917, the Tsar was deposed and a bourgeois Provisional government was formed. It tried but failed to suppress the revolutionary upsurge that ended with the working class’s overthrow of Russian capitalism in October 1917, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

Brogan’s comments expose the lie that the political establishment is fighting to bring about a new dawn for democracy. In fact, the phone hacking scandal has exposed the extremely narrow social base of capitalist rule and the criminality of the entire corporate and political elite. The bourgeoisie senses that workers will angrily reject demands for social cuts based on “shared sacrifice” and claims that “we are all in this together,” when politicians are seen being bought and sold by News Corp. Certain adjustments are necessary.

As such, the ruling class’s intervention in the hacking scandal aims above all to put the state in a better position when it decides to “really get ugly” with the working class. The Murdoch hacking affair is not the prelude to a renaissance of capitalist democracy, but to further explosions of the class struggle.

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