

Britain: Westminster council ban SEP public meeting in attack on democratic rights

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In an attack on democratic rights, an August 4 public meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was banned on political grounds by management at Vital Regeneration who are contracted to run residents meeting halls by Westminster local authority, London.

The meeting, which was to present a socialist analysis of the phone hacking scandal surrounding Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, was to have been held in Fisherton Hall, a community hall in the Church Street ward, west London. The SEP is vigorously opposing this ban.

The SEP has held two previous public meetings at meeting rooms in Church Street and has become well known in the area. The first meeting was against the NATO bombing of Libya and the next on the need for a second, socialist revolution in Egypt. No complaints about the meetings, or the extensive campaigns preceding, were made.

The procedure and application forms used to book and pay for all three meetings contained no prohibition of political parties. But on August 2, Sadia Ur-Rehman, Community Enterprise Manager for Vital Regeneration, which is contracted to run resident meeting places, informed an SEP member political meetings were banned.

When the SEP pointed out that there was no reference to the exclusion of political meetings in the contract, a new version of the hire agreement was forwarded with two clauses not in the original.

Now Clause 31 states that, "The premises are not to be used to promote the views of any political party or group, nor for the raising of funds for any political party or group. Vital Regeneration reserves the right to refuse hire if the proposed event is political in nature."

Both versions of the hire agreement were dated 29/09/10, although the manager said the additional

clauses were added "a month" ago. Later the same manager told an SEP member that on the allotted time and day of the meeting two community police officers would be placed on the door to prevent "unrest." When challenged it was described as a precaution.

The following day an SEP campaign stall was approached by the head of the Church Street market wardens who demanded the name of the organisation and the names of all individuals on the stall. This, he claimed, was so that action could be taken if there were any complaints against those campaigning. After checking the details, he announced that the SEP was not on his list of organisations "banned from here."

This series of incidents cannot be passed off as an overreaction by a group of overzealous council officials. The attempt to insinuate that the SEP is a threat to public order is particularly insidious.

The ban on the SEP meeting occurred only days after the counter-terrorist "focus desk" at Westminster's Belgravia police station issued a leaflet to residents drawing an equal sign between people with "anarchist" sympathies and Al Qaeda terrorists.

Addressed to local people and businesses, the leaflet stated that anarchism "promotes a stateless society, or anarchy. Any information relating to anarchists should be reported to your local police."

The Metropolitan Police issued a formal retraction saying "it does not seek to stigmatise those people with legitimate political views". However, it continued that, "People purporting to be anarchists have caused criminal damage this year to business premises, and government buildings in Westminster. The message we were trying to convey was to gather information on criminal acts to help us prevent crime and bring offenders to justice."

The leaflet was issued under Project Griffin, a police

initiative founded ostensibly to “advise and familiarise managers, security officers and employees of large public and private sector organisations across the capital on security, counter-terrorism and crime prevention issues”.

The Project, which has been in operation in Westminster since 2004 and is now being rolled out across the country, “brings together and coordinates the resources of the police, emergency services, local authorities, business and the private sector security industry,” in order to “empower” people to report “suspicious activity and behaviour.”

There is every reason to believe that the ban on the SEP meeting is part of this broader clampdown on democratic rights, whereby Project Griffin and anti-terrorist measures more generally are used to intimidate and silence political organisations and their supporters.

Church Street ward has its own information portal, which is part of its own branch of the “CommunitySafe” group Church Street Ward Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT). It works closely with Project Griffin officials receiving intelligence updates.

Since the beginning of the year and the escalation of protests against government austerity measures, the communication updates sent from police to such organisations concentrates almost exclusively on protests and strikes. Some examples displayed on the Church Street (SNT) web site can be accessed at the following web address which cannot be publicly reproduced under threat of prosecution;

<http://www.communitysafe.gov.uk/channels/139-church-street-ward-snt-westminster>

It should be noted that this ban was imposed just days before the eruption of youth revolts across London. This is not an accidental connection. Inequality in Westminster is amongst the most extreme in the capital, and the country as a whole. The Conservative-led council are implementing some of the most vicious attacks on the working class. Cuts to housing benefit subsidies alone are expected to drive 5,000 of the poorest families out of the borough. At the same time the council have also tried to criminalise the homeless and those who give them food. Westminster is the seat of government that is at the forefront of criminalising dissent.

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* are

encouraged to send letters of protest at the ban on the SEP and the assault on democratic rights by Westminster council to the following addresses:

Vital Regeneration
Westminster Works Team
hforde@vitalregen.org
jhickman@vitalregen.org

Complaints team
Policy Planning and Performance
16th floor
City Hall
64 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6QP
customercomplaints@westminster.gov.uk



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact