

Church and City move to evict Occupy London camp

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Legal moves to evict the Occupy the London Stock Exchange protest camp from outside St Paul's Cathedral, central London are to start today.

Lawyers acting for the cathedral and the City of London Corporation—which governs the “Square Mile,” including the Bank of England and the Stock Exchange—are to take injunctions against the camp.

A statement by St Paul's said, “following the advice of our lawyers, legal action has regrettably become necessary,” having failed to convince the protesters to move on.

Referring to the 240 tents outside the cathedral, the Corporation claimed it had “no problem with a peaceable 24-hour protest by people without tents—provided the highway is fully usable—but campsites and important highways don't mix.”

The police are also said to be “finalising” plans for the forcible removal of the protesters.

The moves come as police and authorities in the US have made repeated attacks on Occupy Wall Street encampments with the aim of breaking up the protests. Last Wednesday, police attacked the Occupy Oakland camp, during which Iraq veteran Scott Olsen was seriously injured by a tear gas canister.

The Occupy London camp was set up on October 15 in solidarity with worldwide protests in support of the Occupy movement in the US. The original intention had been to occupy Paternoster Square, home to the London Stock Exchange. When this was prevented by police, protesters encamped outside St Paul's.

The protest was initially welcomed by representatives of the iconic Church of England Cathedral. In front of television cameras, Giles Fraser, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, declared that the peaceful protest was welcome and that the issue of social inequality was one of deep concern for the church.

Within days, however, the church authorities were claiming that the camp was threatening the health and safety of passers-by and tourists visiting the cathedral, and that it would be forced to close unless the protesters withdrew.

On Friday October 21, the cathedral closed its doors. Its

decision was the occasion for the media and church authorities to decry the fact that the last time St Paul's had been forced to close was in late 1940, during Nazi Germany's blitz of the capital.

The comparison between the danger presented by the Luftwaffe's 76-day bombing of London, and a relatively small encampment was made all the more absurd when it became clear that the London Fire Brigade had made no objections to the camp. A spokesperson for the LFB said, “We haven't raised any real fire safety concerns with the authorities at St Paul's.”

The safety assertion was part of a concerted campaign aimed at trying to whip up public opinion against the protest in preparation for legal and police measures to close it down.

The media, led by the *Daily Telegraph*, ran claims by police that thermal imaging technology it had employed proved that nine in ten of the tents were left empty at night. It was a “phantom protest,” the media claimed, with those involved putting in just a few hours to disrupt the city, before going home to warm beds in the evening. This was angrily contested by the protesters who hired the same technology to disprove the claims.

At the same time, the cathedral complained it was losing up to £20,000 a day in tourist revenues due to the closure. Writing in the *London Evening Standard*, Dr Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, claimed that the “original purpose of the protests, to shine a light on issues such as corporate greed and executive pay, has been all but extinguished.”

The church was involved “in ongoing discussions with city leaders about improving shareholder influence on excessive remuneration,” he said, offering to “convene a panel from across the political and business spectrum [to discuss the issues] and will invite the protesters to be represented.”

Boris Johnson, Conservative Mayor of London, said the protesters had made their point and “have to go.” On BBC's *Newsnight* programme, Nigel Farage, from the UK Independence Party, said: “Public opinion will start to turn against those in the camp and with Remembrance Sunday only a few weeks away, it will be a travesty if a service cannot be held at St Paul's.” Farage's deadline for clearing the camp by November 13 was supported by Labour MP Gloria De Piero.

Their comments were made as it was revealed that executive

directors at FTSE 100 companies had seen their remuneration rise by 49 percent in 2010. Salaries, bonuses and other perks averaged at £2.7 million, at a time when the government's austerity measures have seen wage freezes in the public sector and significant cuts in pay in many industries.

It was clear that concerted moves were afoot to shut the camp when Giles Fraser stepped down on Thursday saying he could not sanction the cathedral supporting force to remove protesters. "The church should not put its name to any course of action that may lead to violence against the protesters. I can't in conscience go down the road on which they are embarked."

On Friday, the cathedral reopened its doors. The same morning, the City of London's Planning and Transportation Committee voted overwhelmingly in favour of "the commencement of proceedings to remove the encampment" because it constituted an "unreasonable use of the highway."

The report claimed the protest was leading to a drop in pedestrian numbers, severely impacting on retail in the area and harming the "visual impact" of the cathedral. It also claimed that protesters were using cathedral grounds as toilets.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey claimed sympathy with the protests. But he wrote the protesters determination to continue their camp "at the expense of Christian worship in one of our greatest cathedrals surely gives the lie to [their] claim that they represent 99 per cent of society." And he cited the bogus thermal imaging pictures to assert the "hollow nature of the protest movement. The emerging picture of spoilt middle class children returning home at night for a shower and a warm bed begged questions about their commitment to their cause."

Police have made clear they are prepared to move in. Metropolitan Police Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe said that Section 14 of the Public Order Act meant the protesters could be evicted from outside St Paul's and another camp based in Finsbury Square, if it was decided they were causing "serious" disruption to the public.

The decision of the church to solidarise itself with the political establishment and the multi-millionaire interests of the Square Mile has caused much handwringing in the so-called liberal media.

The *Guardian* editorialised that the "rather messy and absurd situation" surrounding the camp "has handed the dean and chapter of St Paul's a truly historic opportunity to discredit Christianity in this country. They seem determined to take it. They should think, and stop."

While deriding "aspects" of the Occupy protest as "silly and rather squalid," and stating that the "protesters aren't right about everything. A lot of the time they aren't even coherent enough to be wrong." It cautioned that those involved "aren't the usual Spartist suspects."

The camp "still represents a profound and important moral revulsion" which the Church of England needed to be engaged with "for its own sake and for the sake of the country." In

particular, "The cathedral has a chance to take Marx's taunt about religion being 'the heart of a heartless world' and try to make it true, and valuable. It must not fumble this."

In truth, the actions of the cathedral are threatening to expose the big business interests of the Church of England. It is not the spurious assertions of "health and safety" that lay behind its threats to the camp but the fact that the church is part of the top 1 percent of super-rich that the protests are directed against.

The website Tax Research UK pointed out that "David Rouch, a partner at the City law firm Freshfields, sits on the council of reference of the St Paul's Institute, while Roger Gifford, the chairman of the Association of Foreign Banks, sits as a trustee of the St Paul's Cathedral Foundation. Carol Sergeant, the chief risk director for Lloyds Banking Group, and John Spence, a former managing director for Lloyds, are also foundation trustees."

The Church of England has an investment fund of approximately £6 billion through its involvement in property, private equity and the Stock Exchange. It has extensive investments in the oil giants BP and Shell, as well as shareholdings in leading banks such as HSBC, Barclays and Lloyds.

In April, it was reported that the Church of England's investment fund had grown by £500 million in one year "after a strong performance," rising by 15.2 percent.

The Church of England also has £3.8 million of shares in Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and £5.3 million in BSkyB, which is part owned by the multi-billionaire arch reactionary.

Suggestions that the church should pull out of Murdoch's companies following the *News of the World* scandal, involving the extensive phone-hacking scandal and other illegal activity, including the bribery of police officers, were rejected by the body that manages its assets.

Andreas Whittam Smith, a journalist on the *Independent* newspaper and a church commissioner, told the General Synod, the church's national assembly, in July, "A premature sale of [church shares in] News Corp and BSkyB might just be simply very bad timing."

Should News Corp have to get rid of its British newspapers as a result of the scandal, "first of all the problem would have vanished from the point of view of the parent company, and for us as investors, and the shares will certainly bounce up again," Whittam Smith was quoted as saying.



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