

Man jailed in Greater Manchester, England, for shirt critical of police

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16 October 2012

Barry Thew was sentenced to four months' imprisonment for wearing a t-shirt in Bury, Greater Manchester, bearing the inscription "One less PiG Perfect Justice" and "kill a cop4fun.co.uk Ha, haaa?"

Thew was arrested on September 19 for wearing his handwritten t-shirt on the day that two police officers were killed in Tameside, Greater Manchester. He was hurried before the courts the day after, where he pleaded guilty to an offence under section 4a of the Public Order Act—displaying, writing or other visible representation with intention of causing harassment, alarm or distress. Judge Peter Larkin said Thew had paraded around in a t-shirt bearing "the most disgusting of slogans".

According to several press reports, Thew blames the police for the death of his teenage son three years ago. Speaking in his defence, barrister Stuart Duke said Thew was still taking anti-psychotic medication following a period as an inpatient at a mental health unit. This was simply dismissed by the judge, who said his mental health was "not a factor".

Thew's conviction follows that of 19-year-old Azhar Ahmed on October 9, who was sentenced to 240 hours of community service for a Facebook posting saying "All soldiers should DIE & go to HELL!" Ahmed had posted his comments following the deaths of six British soldiers in Afghanistan.

In her sentencing remarks, District Judge Jane Goodwin said she was satisfied the case had passed the custody threshold, but that Ahmed's age and previous good record meant she would impose a Community Order rather than a custodial sentence.

Defending Ahmed, Nicholas Barker said he had initially been voicing legitimate concerns about the victims of war. Part of his post on Facebook reads, "What about the innocent familys [sic] who have been

brutally killed.. The women who have been raped.. The children who have been sliced up.."

The Public Order Act used to sentence Thew was introduced by the Conservative government in 1986, in the aftermath of the year-long miners' strike. It enables a police officer to arrest any person suspected of using "threatening, abusive or insulting words". The maximum sentence for the offence is six months' imprisonment.

Ahmed was prosecuted under the Communications Act 2003. While largely dealing with the setting up OFCOM, the body charged with regulating communications and broadcasting, the Act also introduced offences that relate to the Internet. A person is guilty of an offence if he or she sends "by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive", and faces a maximum custodial sentence of six months.

Neither act provides any definition of the terms that can lead to an offence, leaving their interpretation to the police and the courts.

Ahmed and Thew have been punished solely for publicly expressing their hostile opinion of two essential pillars of the bourgeois state—the army and police. They are being made an example of and to set a precedent—this is what to expect should you go "too far" in your criticism of the authorities.

The punishment meted out stands in stark contrast to the response to the publishing of cartoons denigrating the Prophet Muhammad. These crude attempts to whip up anti-Muslim sentiments are defended by the political establishment and most of the media as a paramount expression of "free speech", while the full force of the law is used to suppress those protesting against the cartoons.

In sentencing Ahmed, District Judge Jane Goodwin

said she was not seeking to halt strongly voiced political opinions, but she was satisfied his post had been “grossly offensive” because it was “beyond the pale of what is tolerable in our society”.

Who is Judge Goodwin to decide what is “beyond the pale”?

These cases reveal how the ruling elite in Britain has abandoned even any pretence of upholding fundamental democratic rights, such as the freedom of expression. The punishing of those deemed to have offended elements of the state itself—in the judgements, reference was made to the insult felt by police officers and soldiers—is a practice usually associated with despotic regimes.



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