

Far right promotes UK fascist Tommy Robinson as free-speech “martyr”

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English Defence League (EDL) founder Tommy Robinson has been hailed as a free speech martyr by the far-right, after he was jailed on May 25 for contempt of court. He was arrested outside Leeds Crown Court for live-streaming a fascistic rant against “Muslim paedophiles” and “Muslim rapists” during the concluding stage of a child-grooming trial.

Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and Donald Trump Jr. are among those to have issued statements in Robinson’s defence. Wilders spoke outside the British Embassy at The Hague Tuesday, saying Robinson was “a freedom fighter” whose jailing showed “the authorities are trying to silence us, while Islamists are pampered, protected and defended.”

Alternative for Germany (AfD) MP Petr Bystron described him as a “political prisoner,” telling *Breitbart London* he would help Robinson apply for asylum in Germany.

Robinson’s stunt was a calculated provocation—his arrest and subsequent jailing a guaranteed outcome.

During more than an hour of live-streamed footage to an estimated 12,000 viewers, Robinson verbally attacked those of Asian appearance as they entered the court, demanding, “Got your prison bag with you?” and “Got any guilt?” “Thirty percent of them are called Mohammed,” he told viewers, “and they are English girls.” He filmed outside the court while on a suspended three-month sentence for a previous contempt of court conviction. On that occasion, he had also filmed during a live criminal trial, at Canterbury Crown Court, attacking defendants as “Muslim paedophiles.”

At his sentencing hearing in May 2017, Judge Norton had warned he would face a custodial sentence, with added time, in the event of any further breach. He explained that Robinson’s conviction was because his actions infringed the right to a fair trial:

“This contempt hearing is not about free speech. This is not about the freedom of the press. This is not about legitimate journalism; this is not about political correctness; this is not about whether one political viewpoint is right or another. It is about justice, and it is about ensuring that a trial can be carried out justly and fairly. It is about ensuring that a jury are not in any way inhibited from carrying out their important function. It is about being innocent until proven guilty.”

Far from Robinson being “victimised,” he received leniency at that hearing. The judge agreed to suspend a custodial sentence based on arguments by Robinson’s defence team that he would face “dangers” in prison.

Fully aware that his subsequent actions outside Leeds Crown Court were illegal, Robinson told viewers while filming, “There is a reporting restriction on this case.” Judge Marson QC imposed a 13-month prison sentence later that day after Robinson pleaded guilty to contempt of court.

Robinson’s livestream during an ongoing trial was an attack on the basic democratic rights of the defendants to the presumption of innocence. Despite his depraved claims to be representing the victims of child grooming, his filming threatened to expose the identities of alleged

victims and witnesses, including minors. *Leeds Live* reporter Stephanie Finnegan saw Robinson filming in front of jurors.

But according to the fascists, it is Robinson whose rights have been violated.

Within minutes of his arrest, far-right supporters in the UK and internationally claimed Robinson was the victim of a political witch-hunt and called for action. The following day, hundreds of far-right supporters, including UK Independence Party (UKIP), Football Lads Alliance and Generation Identity members, protested outside Downing Street. Banners included “Free the truth teller” and “White Lives Matter,” amid Union Jack and St. George flags. A petition to free Robinson has gained more than 500,000 signatures, with a further demonstration planned for June 9.

Writing last Saturday, *Zero Edge* said Robinson was being targeted by “an Orwellian media blackout—which resulted in several publications deleting their articles from the web covering Robinson’s arrest”.

Temporary reporting restrictions—known as a “postponement order”—were imposed at Robinson’s sentencing hearing to stop the ongoing trial at Leeds Crown Court from being prejudiced. The order was lifted on May 29, after the judge upheld an appeal by *Leeds Live* and the *Independent* arguing the media ban had been rendered ineffective by extensive and inaccurate reporting by international news outlets and on social media, including alt-right networks.

The far-right’s “Asian grooming” narrative

The Leeds Crown Court case (R v Akhtar and others) is one of a series of high profile grooming trials seized on by the far-right to promote anti-Islamic and race hatred. On March 7, Britain First leaders Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen were jailed for 18 and 36 weeks respectively over the same Canterbury Crown Court trial Robinson latched onto last May. The pair were convicted of religiously-aggravated harassment after filming repeated confrontations at the homes and workplaces of four men they described as “the Ramsgate migrant rapists.”

In one of three incidents for which she was convicted, Fransen leafleted streets surrounding the former home of Faiz Rahmani while he was remanded in custody awaiting trial for the alleged rape of a 16-year-old girl. The leaflets displayed his address and listed the charges against him, in a clear attempt to incite a lynch-mob. Fransen then bashed at the front door and windows where Rahmani’s pregnant former-partner, Kelli Best, lived alone with her two young children. The Britain First leader yelled racist obscenities, demanding those inside show their face. Best was so traumatised that she later miscarried.

The campaign against “Asian grooming” and the racialisation of sex crime was not invented by the fascists. It is a staple of the mainstream media, ushered in by a 2011 front page article published by Rupert

Murdoch's *Times* that singled out, based on highly selective data, an Asian model of "on-street grooming."

The *Times* piece, with its insinuation that Asian sex gangs were being protected by political correctness, was quickly amplified by the tabloids.

Claims of an Asian sex crime wave sweeping England's north have been repeatedly contested by leading academics and charities. In a 2014 paper, "Grooming and the 'Asian sex gang predator': the construction of a racial crime threat," criminologist Ella Cockbain called out the *Times* for its use of "spurious statistics." The 50 Muslims cited by the *Times* in its initial report formed part of 17 "grooming" cases: "Despite the severity of the offences, 17 cases hardly constitute the alleged 'tidal wave of offending,' a clear example of the disproportionality of the original threat, a key ingredient for any moral panic."

As Cockbain explained, "grooming is not a distinct criminal offence. [It] is better understood as a subset of CSE (child sexual exploitation), itself a broad, umbrella-type phenomenon encompassing diverse offences—ranging from rape to sexual activity with a child, to false imprisonment."

Once this contextualised approach is taken, the racial narrative of the *Times* falls apart. According to Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) figures cited by FullFact (covering the period of the *Times* investigation), "Almost 85% of offenders found guilty of sexual activity with a minor in England and Wales in 2011 were white. 3% were black and 4% were Asian and the rest were either listed as 'other' or unknown."

Political censorship

Robinson's media stunt is an attempt on his part to stake a leading role in an ongoing regroupment of Britain's far-right that reflects broader international processes. With UKIP on the verge of collapse since the June 2016 Brexit referendum—its platform largely adopted by the Conservatives—Robinson and others are hoping to emulate the rise of the AfD, PPV and France's National Front (FN).

The rise of such parties has been possible only due to the rottenness of the official left parties and trade unions, which have enforced brutal social inequality, censorship and war.

FN leader Marine Le Pen claims to represent "the France of the people," against "the moneyed right, and the moneyed left," while denouncing "a globalization from below, via mass immigration"—themes repeated by the populist right in country after country.

The far-right's attribution of poverty and unemployment to increased immigration mirrors the economic nationalist programme of the Labour Party, trade unions and sections of the pseudo-left. Britain First's declaration that, "We want British jobs for British workers and will make sure that our workers come first," is virtually identical to statements made during the Brexit referendum by advocates of a so-called "Left Brexit," including George Galloway and the Socialist Party.

Robinson has been at a loose end since his resignation from the EDL in 2013. He briefly joined the anti-Islamic extremism Quilliam think-tank that has close state connections (a role for which he reportedly received £2,000 per month), before presiding over an abortive re-launch of the British wing of Pegida in 2016 with Ann Marie Waters. Waters later failed in her bid to become UKIP leader (in June 2017), founding a new party, For Britain, in December. Robinson was employed as a journalist by Canadian alt-right site *Rebel News* before launching his own news site.

The viral social media campaigns that have followed Robinson's arrest and jailing must serve as a warning to the working class. These groups do not presently enjoy mass support, but their influence is growing. By November 2017, Britain First had two million Facebook likes, with a

surge in support after US President Donald Trump retweeted anti-Muslim videos shared by Fransen. By the end of the year the group had the "second most liked Facebook page in the politics and society category in the UK—after the royal family," according to anti-fascist think-tank Hope Not Hate.

While claims that Robinson was jailed last week for defending free speech are bogus, the attack by the state on far-right groups and social media companies raises real issues of political censorship.

In December 2016, the Conservative government proscribed the neo-Nazi National Action as a terrorist organisation. Under the order now in place, being a member or inviting support for the organisation is a criminal offence, carrying a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

In November 2017, Britain First was deregistered as a party by the Electoral Commission. Its party name will not appear on ballot papers and a description of the party will no longer be available via the electoral commission's online register.

In December 2017, Twitter suspended the accounts of both Fransen and Golding, as new guidelines took effect announced by Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey in November.

In March 2018, Facebook deleted the accounts of Golding, Fransen and Britain First for breaching the platform's "community standards."

On March 28, the BBC reported that Twitter had placed a permanent ban (not just a suspension) on Robinson for breaching its "hateful conduct" policy.

Predictably, this state suppression has only served to strengthen the far-right's "anti-establishment" credentials. Robinson's supporters can claim the mantle of free speech martyrs, even as they fan the very nationalist and racist poison being spewed up by imperialist governments around the world to attack and divide the working class.

Moreover, state repression against the right has long proved to be a prelude to a broader attack on the democratic rights of the working class and state repression directed against the left. Under conditions of a global resurgence of the class struggle, the past year has seen a state-orchestrated suppression of left-wing, socialist and anti-war websites by social media giants Google, Facebook and Twitter. The *World Socialist Web Site* is leading an international campaign against these efforts as part of the struggle to unite the international working class against the resurgence of nationalism, militarism and war.

Official "left" and liberal circles have been at the forefront of demands for state censorship against the far-right. After Britain First was banned by Facebook in March, Hope Not Hate's head of research urged the social media giant to take stronger action. Matthew Collins told the *Guardian* that Britain First could collapse "if Facebook stays strong" and urged them to "follow up on the mirror and back-up sites" run by the group. "With Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen jailed... It could very well be all the way downhill for them from here."

The class basis of such appeals to the state was spelled out by Owen Jones in a May 31 *Guardian* column on Robinson. After explaining that "those on the far-right do not believe in freedom at all," Jones advances a theory of freedom that justifies sweeping censorship:

"There is a chasm separating the right to free speech and the privilege of being given a platform to make your views known. No one has a right to a platform... The vast majority of people do not have regular TV slots, or newspaper columns, or radio shows—that does not mean their freedom of speech is under assault. Yes, I would argue that platforms are not fairly distributed: the vast majority of Britons support renationalisation of utilities, for example, or higher taxes on the rich, but those opinions are not adequately represented in the media. But that is a separate argument from freedom of expression."

According to Jones, we should all have the "right" to free speech—just not the "privilege" of actually having our voices heard! This extraordinary theory of freedom doubtless met with enthusiastic agreement at the

editorial offices of the *Guardian*, but anyone with a shred of democratic sentiment will see it as an unabashed defence of state and corporate power.

Jones speaks for sections of the upper middle class who view the far-right as a foreign body in an otherwise healthy organism. He declares, “The cry of ‘free speech’ is simply a ruse to turn back the clock and in doing so justify stripping away hard-won rights and freedoms from women and minorities.”

Jones opposes the fascists not from the standpoint of the working class, but on behalf of privileged social layers who have utilised identity politics to carve out comfortable careers in academia, NGOs, the media and publishing. Their calls for state censorship against the right are bound up with their overriding defence of capitalism.

That is why there is not a word in Jones’ column about the unprecedented and growing levels of social distress in the working class. Nothing of the 1.8 million workers on zero hours contracts, or the 14 million people in poverty—one in five across the UK. Nothing of the 1,332,952 emergency food parcels delivered last year. Or of the £2.5 billion slashed this year from welfare payments to the poorest 11 million families. Or of the 100,000 more children in poverty in the past year alone, with nearly half in London, Manchester and Birmingham now growing up poor.

If right-wing populists like Robinson can win support, this is only because the official left offers no programme to fight this mounting social catastrophe. Jeremy Corbyn’s insipid reforms and his constant supplications to the Blairite right; the TUC’s role as industrial policeman for the state; and the pseudo-left’s self-absorbed infatuation with identity politics—all of this is aimed at blocking the growing restiveness and oppositional sentiments in the working class.

The only social force that can oppose the growth of the far-right is the working class. The fight to unite all sections of the working class—black, white and Asian—in opposition to social inequality and war, and for socialism, provides the only genuine answer to the growth of the far-right.



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