

Leaks expose UK and EU government plans for military deployment in Brexit crisis

Chris Marsden
29 January 2019

The *Sunday Times* has reported that the Conservative government is planning for the possible imposition of martial law as a result of the deepening crisis over Britain's exiting the European Union (EU). The *Daily Mirror* reported that the EU is anticipating violence on the streets and decades of political instability.

The *Sunday Times* report is based on leaks from the Cabinet Office. It states that top civil servants in Whitehall have been "gaming a state of emergency and even the introduction of martial law in the event of disorder after a no-deal Brexit" (leaving the EU with no trade deal agreed).

Robert MacFarlane, the deputy director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, is identified as being involved in discussions on the use of powers "to deal with national emergencies such as acts of war and terrorism"—part of no-deal contingency planning known as Operation Yellowhammer.

Top civil servants would use the sweeping powers embodied in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, introduced by the Labour government of Tony Blair.

"Curfews, bans on travel, confiscation of property and, most drastic, the deployment of the armed forces to quell rioting are among the measures available to ministers under the legislation," the newspaper writes. "They can also amend any act of parliament, except the Human Rights Act, for a maximum of 21 days."

The pretext for the Civil Contingencies Act was the Blair government's assertion that previous emergency legislation had been proved inadequate—in events such as the severe flooding of 2000 and the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001, but also more generally in waging the so-called "war on terror" after the 9/11 attacks in the US.

The Act granted extraordinary new powers, enabling the government to declare a state of emergency without a parliamentary vote, with ministers empowered to introduce "emergency regulations" under the Royal

Prerogative that are virtually unlimited. They include the power to "give directions or orders" including the destruction of property, prohibiting assemblies, closing down electronic communication, banning travel and outlawing "other specified activities."

The Defence Council, comprised of ministers, senior civil servants and military leaders, can deploy the armed services, again without prior parliamentary debate or approval. Emergency regulations may be passed "protecting or restoring activities of Her Majesty's Government," effectively allowing the Defence Council absolutist power—including "any provision which the person making the regulations is satisfied is appropriate" to protect human life, health and safety.

A source told the *Sunday Times*, "The overriding theme in all the no-deal planning is civil disobedience and the fear that it will lead to death in the event of food and medical shortages."

Responding to statements that the model used for a no-deal scenario is the impact on Iceland of ash clouds caused by a volcanic eruption in 2010, another source told the newspaper, "Although there is nothing that can replicate the scale of the chaos threatened by a no-deal Brexit, which will be about a thousand times worse than the volcanic-ash-cloud crisis, this is about the closest example we have in modern British history."

"The only other thing that would be comparable would be something like a major Europe-wide war."

Speaking to the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*, Health Secretary Matt Hancock sought to downplay concerns, saying there was no "specific" plan for martial law, adding: "Of course government all the time looks at all the options in all circumstances. It remains on the statute book, but it isn't the focus of our attention."

Pro-Brexit Conservatives and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn have both previously rubbished such reports of a planned use of the military as part of a "Project Fear" to

secure acceptance of Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed deal with the EU being debated today in parliament.

It is significant, therefore, that details of an EU report into the post-Brexit crisis leaked to the *Daily Mirror* do not single out a no-deal scenario. As far as European security and intelligence officials are concerned, Britain will descend into political chaos whatever happens in the coming months.

The secret EU report is not directly cited, but only alluded to by the *Mirror*. EU officials "are believed to have warned that civil unrest and rioting is almost inevitable, regardless of the outcome of the current political deadlock," the newspaper reports.

An EU source states, "Analysis of the threat levels in Britain is being shared at the top of the EU as we formulate policy for the years ahead. The assessment is that violence is almost inevitable no matter what.

"They are worried that if the current deal goes through the right-wing will kick off. If there's no deal everybody will object and kick off. If there's a second referendum, the right will kick off. The right kicking off is causing most concern. This analysis is being kept very quiet for obvious reasons."

Confirming that escalating state repression is being considered in all eventualities, the pro-Brexit *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the Electoral Commission is seeking to give itself new "powers of prosecution" prior to any second referendum on Brexit. The newspaper states that the new powers would mean the Commission could bring prosecutions directly against political parties and campaign groups.

The EU is also predicting the possible break-up of the UK, with independence referendums in Scotland and Northern Ireland within 18 months of Brexit.

In a related warning, Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said at the Davos summit last week that soldiers may be deployed to the border with Northern Ireland in a no-deal scenario. The return of a hard border could "involve people in uniform and it may involve the need, for example, for cameras, physical infrastructure, possibly a police presence, or an army presence to back it up," Varadkar told Bloomberg.

A senior UK government source told the *Mirror*, "We are seeing civil disobedience across Europe and a growth of the far-right. Anything which changes the status quo, like Brexit, gives those people the opportunity to foment division. We could see protests and public disorder offences."

All such claims that the "far-right" will be the target of any planned repression should be rejected. There is no doubt that Britain's as yet small fascistic right-wing will seek to exploit social unrest and channel anti-EU sentiment in a nationalist and reactionary direction—just as have France's National Rally (formerly National Front), the Lega in Italy and similar larger formations. However, the power of the state will not be directed against such tendencies, which across Europe are either being embraced or even brought into government, but against the true source of social discontent—the working class.

France's Yellow Vests are routinely slandered as far right extremists by the government of Emmanuel Macron for the "crime" of opposing his savage austerity measures. But it is thousands of working people who have been arrested, brutalised, maimed and killed by riot police on the streets of France. And it would be no different in the UK.

Everywhere a crisis of bourgeois rule is emerging, leading invariably to a sharp turn to authoritarianism and state repression—Donald Trump's threat to declare a state of national emergency in the US, Rodrigo Duterte's slaughter of 20,000 in his so-called "war on drugs" in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro's glorification of Brazil's military junta.

This is the ruling class's response to an explosive growth of social inequality that is rendering impossible the preservation of democracy. The only answer to this danger is the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the ruling elite and its state apparatus. In the UK, this means rejecting any alliance with the pro- and anti-Brexit wings of the capitalist class and forging a unified struggle for a socialist Europe with workers across the continent who face the same threats of social ruin and political repression.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact