UK Counter Terrorism Policing document seeks to outlaw political dissent

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21 January 2020

The UK government's new Counter Terrorism Policing document reveals the full scope of political surveillance and suppression intended under the Prevent "anti-radicalisation" programme.

The 24-page "guidance document," parts of which were published by the *Guardian* on Friday, lists prominent left-wing, anti-war and environmental groups alongside far-right, fascist and white supremacist organisations such as Britain First, the English Defence League and the neo-Nazi National Front terrorist group. The list includes the Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, PETA, Stop the Badger Cull, the Socialist Workers Party, Stand Up to Racism and the Socialist Party.

In June 2019, it was circulated as guidance material via the government's Prevent programme to selected official committees dedicated to enforcing its policies within the UK's five-and-a-half million-strong public sector workforce. Employees are required by Prevent to report on members of the public, especially children, who they suspect are being "radicalised" by extremist and terrorist organisations.

A senior teacher who received the document in Prevent training told the *Guardian*, "The document is extraordinarily vague and leaves a great deal down to the interpretation of the individual member of staff. Clustering relatively innocuous groups like Greenpeace and CND in with genuine extremist groups seems to imply that these organisations are on the radar of the counter-terrorism police and should also be interpreted as such by the teaching staff coming across them."

Revelations about the counter-terrorism document have produced a public outcry. Many of the listed organisations have issued statements of protest since Friday. Environmental protest group Extinction Rebellion (XR), which advocates "peaceful civil disobedience," issued a statement warning of the guide's "chilling effect… This labeling of ordinary people—grandparents, doctors, pregnant mothers, bus drivers, rabbis and more—concerned about the environment is deeply concerning."

"In the past few months," XR continued, "we've seen cases of people being banned from political conferences, asked to keep quiet at work and investigated by employers for speaking out against company policy and taking days off to go on strike."

The Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which in 2003 organised the biggest anti-war protest in UK history, condemned what it described as its "totally groundless inclusion" in the document "alongside violent neo-Nazi organisations." They continued: "This reinforces the concern we have long expressed about the Prevent initiative, that it would be used more widely against groups critical of government policy."

STWC announced they intend taking "urgent steps to ensure the removal of all reference to Stop the War and other progressive organisations from this and other Prevent and anti-terrorism documents."

Animal rights group PETA's director, Elisa Allen, said, "This appears to be a sinister attempt to quash legitimate campaigning organisations—something that is as dangerous as it is undemocratic."

Sabby Dhalu, Stand Up to Racism co-convenor, said, "We have already seen Prevent used to target the Muslim community and undermine democracy and free speech in schools. The targeting of legitimate non-violent campaigns means the right to protest is now genuinely under threat. We have already seen heavy-handed policing of protests and infiltration of progressive campaigns by security forces. Where will this process end?"

The targeting of left-wing, anti-war and environmental groups by UK Counter Terrorism police is part of a policy framework agreed at the highest levels of the British state for mass surveillance and the abrogation of fundamental democratic rights. Anyone referred to the police via Prevent is immediately assessed as to whether he or she is at risk of radicalization and added to a database. Last October, the human rights group Liberty noted that a police database with full access to Prevent records was "being used to monitor and control communities."

An organisation's listing in counter-terror documents can be used as a pretext to deny it use of public and private meeting spaces or to censor its writings. A December 2015 document, "Councils' role in preventing extremism," reads: "The Prevent team has also worked with staff and managers in charge of bookings at local community and private venues to make sure they are informed of the Prevent processes and understand how to block people who may be intending to use the spaces for

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malicious purposes."

Universities have also restricted access to texts in deference to Prevent. This amounts to a severe restriction on the right to free speech and political expression.

Counter Terrorism police claimed that their document was not meant to brand "all" the groups it features as extremist, pointing to a section that reads: "not all of the signs and symbols noted within this document are of counter terrorism interest." However, as the *Guardian* has noted, this disclaimer appears only alongside a set of historical and religious symbols used by white supremacists, and does not appear alongside the logos of left-wing and environmental groups.

After listing all the groups in its counter-terrorism guidance, the final page of the only published section of the document—a five-page "poster"—reads, "How can I report any concerns identified via this document?" It directs readers to file an online report or call an anonymous police line.

The entire report is cloaked in secrecy, with only a five-page "poster" featuring insignia associated with the listed groups, which has been published in the media. Counter Terrorism Police refused to provide a copy of the report to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), telling our reporter that "we are not sharing the guidance document."

The Home Office refused to provide a copy of the document, telling our reporter it was a matter for Counter Terrorism Policing. When our reporter replied that police and security agencies are both subordinate and answerable to the elected government, a Home Office spokesperson replied that Counter Terrorism Police were "operationally independent from Government." Neither Counter Terrorism Police nor the Home Office were willing to offer any legal basis for withholding such a document from the press.

The wholesale listing of left-wing, anti-war and environmental groups on what amounts to a terrorist watch list points to the dangerous evisceration of democratic rights over the last two decades. Prevent was introduced alongside a raft of legislation by Tony Blair's Labour government in 2003 in the context of the imperialist invasion of Iraq and under cover of the "war on terror."

Its remit was widened in 2011 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. In 2015, legislation made it a statutory duty for school, local authority, prison and National Health Service staff to report any individual deemed vulnerable to radicalization.

The current guidance document prepares the way for categorising any and all political opposition as a form of terror-related activity, with all the draconian consequences that follow—including pre-charge detention for up to 28 days.

Prevent has met with protests from civil liberties and human rights groups and academic and public sector workers. Just as the Counter Terrorism Police guidance document was being revealed, a statement released by human rights charity Cage, signed by more than 100 academics, campaigners, and community organisers, demanded the scheme be abolished.

Most criticism has focused on Prevent's demonisation of Muslims. But while the scheme undoubtedly targets Muslims, the WSWS has always insisted that its primary purpose was to establish the architecture for mass political repression directed against the whole working class.

Under the catch-all term "radicalisation," Prevent establishes two deeply anti-democratic legal precedents. First, it makes the suspected thoughts and opinions of individuals, not their actions, a basis for surveillance and repression. Second, it puts far-right and religious extremism and terrorism, carried out by small and popularly despised groups, often acting under the protection of the security services, on a par with mass democratic political sentiment as represented by left-wing, anti-war and climate change movements.

This has been the underlying motivation for Prevent from the beginning. It has now been brought to the fore by Boris Johnson's Tory government in response to a global resurgence of class struggle and in preparation for vicious attacks on the working class.

This is the common agenda of the ruling class everywhere. In Germany, the Verfassungsschutz (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) has reanimated the Nazi legal conception of Willensstrafrecht (punishment for thought) in making the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, an object of state surveillance as an "extremist" group for supposed "crimes" such as opposing imperialism and war and basing its policies on the class struggle.

The same conceptions animate the ongoing revision of the UK government's Counter Extremism Strategy, which will look to criminalise non-violent "extremist ideology" for the first time. A report published last September for this review by the government's Commission for Countering Extremism listed views such as, "The greatest threat to democracy has always come from the far-right," "We should always support striking workers," "Capitalism is essentially bad and must be destroyed" and "Industry should produce for need and not for profit" as examples of "extremist" thinking.

The logical outcome of these policies is a state of dictatorship, in which all political dissent is criminalised. The ruling class is on a crash course with imperialist war abroad and revolutionary upheavals at home and is assembling all the repressive power of the state in preparation. The international working class must take heed and place the demand for democratic political rights at the centre of its growing strikes and protests around the world.

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