

# UK Tories use Extinction Rebellion protests to argue for savage political repression

Richard Tyler  
12 September 2020

Last Saturday, some 100 Extinction Rebellion (XR) protesters blockaded the presses of several of Britain's main daily papers.

The bamboo barricades they erected outside printing plants in Broxbourne, Liverpool and Glasgow prevented the delivery of millions of copies of the *Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Times*.

The ire of XR was directed at right-wing and pro-government titles, which had “failed to tell the truth about the climate crisis,” the organisation proclaimed on its website. The presses of the supposedly liberal media, such as the *Guardian* and *Independent*, were spared interruption.

The press plant blockades are part of XR's “September Rebellion,” and have so far included demonstrations outside parliament, Buckingham Palace, Tate Britain, the Treasury, and the Home Office.

The disruption to traffic in the capital met with much complaint throughout the mainstream media. However, it was the blockading of the printing presses of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* and *Times*, together with the Tory house organ, the *Telegraph*, and 4th Viscount Rothermere's *Daily Mail* that led to the most ferocious response.

“The *Telegraph* will not be silenced,” the paper thundered, describing the protest as a “blatant attempt to shut down free speech.”

The protesters were “trying to destroy our greatest democratic principle: freedom of speech,” railed the *Sun on Sunday*'s editorial.

In its Sunday edition, the *Times*, voice of the British establishment for over two centuries, reported that those “involved in similar demonstrations in the future will be treated as a ‘saboteur of democracy’, under plans being drawn up the government.” Its leader column looked forward to Home Secretary Priti Patel pushing police forces “to take a more robust line” on the group's disruptive actions.

These right-wing rags loudly protested at the momentary interruption to their ability to spew out their daily lies and distortions. However, their editorial pages have

demonstrably not issued a word in defence of jailed WikiLeaks publisher and journalist Julian Assange, who has actually exposed attacks on democratic and human rights by governments around the world—divulging crimes that have led to the deaths of tens of thousands in wars supported by the very papers now proclaiming their allegiance to democracy.

The Labour Party was swift to join in the chorus of condemnation. Shadow Culture Secretary Jo Stevens said, “A free press is vital for our democracy. People have the right to read the newspapers they want. Stopping them from being distributed and printers from doing their jobs is wrong.”

Former home secretary, now Lord Blunkett, said, “Peaceful protest using distancing is acceptable, anarchy is not.”

After Jeremy Corbyn's former shadow home secretary, Diane Abbott, had meekly defended the protests as “legal,” in the tradition of the “suffragettes,” Labour leader Sir Kier Starmer came under pressure for his silence. He dutifully called the demonstrations “wrong”: “The free press is the cornerstone of democracy and we must do all we can to protect it.”

Murdoch, Rothermere et al demanded the government implement sweeping measures cracking down on protest and abrogating fundamental democratic rights, such as the right to demonstrate.

Taking to the pages of the *Daily Mail*, Home Secretary Priti Patel duly obliged. The protesters were “committing criminal acts” and should be in no doubt they would “face the full force of the law. You will be punished for your actions.” The newspaper reported last Saturday, “A Home Office source said: ‘Priti was furious. She told the police to ‘get stuck in’ to stop a second night of disruption.’”

Subsequently, 80 protesters were arrested and charged with causing a public nuisance and aggravated trespass for their involvement in the blockades. More than 650 arrests have been made by the Metropolitan Police for breaches to the Public Order Act. Using new powers under the

COVID-19 regulations, over £200,000 in fines were issued for exceeding the 30-people limit in a gathering.

In a move underscoring the shift to authoritarian forms of rule, the Metropolitan Police pre-emptively arrested on August 26—ahead of all this month’s protests—XR co-founder Roger Hallam and four other activists who are members of the Beyond Politics group. Hallam founded the group in June after quitting XR. The five were charged with conspiracy to cause criminal damage at planned protests and are being detained in custody for four weeks, until after all planned protests are concluded.

Patel announced further measures to strengthen the repressive state apparatus. “In addition to providing the most generous funding settlement in a decade and recruiting an additional 20,000 officers, I am committed to ensuring that the police have powers required to tackle the disruption caused by groups such as Extinction Rebellion and I will be looking at every opportunity available, including primary legislation, to ensure that there is a full suite of tools available to tackle this behaviour,” she wrote.

“Whitehall sources” soon revealed what this means. According to the *Telegraph*, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had asked officials to take a “fresh look” at the legal status of Extinction Rebellion, and see how it might be classified as an “organised crime group,” putting it on the same footing as the Mafia. Using the powers of the 2015 Serious Crime Act to apply such a designation could expose XR activists to up to five years in jail.

Ministers were also considering “new powers making it easier for police to stop demonstrators entering particular areas, bolstering protections for parts of the UK’s critical national infrastructure, and explicitly outlawing disruption to ‘tenets of democracy’, such as MPs voting in Parliament, judges attending court and the printing and distribution of the free press,” the *Telegraph* reported.

Taken alongside plans for a raft of legislation to outlaw “critical workers”—such as those involved in public transport—from taking strike action, the Tory government is preparing to obliterate long-standing democratic rights affecting millions.

Pointing to the broader target of this offensive, every attempt was made to depict the protests as being motivated by left-wing and socialist sentiments. The *Telegraph* wrote of “fears the group had been infiltrated by far-Left groups that want to pursue a more overtly militant socialist agenda.” The newspaper drew a comparison with protests following the murder of George Floyd in the US, which they claimed without any foundation whatsoever had also been “hijacked by neo-Marxists.” The limited reformist demands of XR, according to the *Telegraph*, are “window dressing for their true purpose: a revolutionary, extremist movement set on

overthrowing our society.”

Extinction Rebellion is a middle class protest group, whose actions are not directed at fundamentally changing the present social order. Indeed, the blockade action was not inspired by any thought of bringing about a societal change that would see the press barons deprived of their possessions. The same purveyors of falsehoods, who are playing a vital role in the government’s homicidal back-to-work drive, hiding the real dangers millions confront from COVID-19, can be won to the cause of environmentalism, according to XR. “The news industry has a key role to play in the transformation we need to face up to the intersecting crises. We desperately need them to stop spreading hatred and lies, and instead take a real lead to help us hold our government to account,” XR wrote on its website.

XR’s “Principles and Values” deliberately make no criticism of capitalism. Faced with the press accusations of being a front for Marxism and revolution, XR issued a tweet refuting any links to socialism. “Just to be clear we are not a socialist movement... A banner saying ‘socialism or extinction’ does not represent us.”

While initially directed against groups such as Extinction Rebellion, the real target of state repression and the move towards authoritarianism is the working class. The sight of tens of thousands engaged in multi-ethnic, multi-racial protests opposing police violence has spooked ruling elites everywhere. Now this is joined by the prospect of strikes and mass protests provoked by the rampaging of the coronavirus pandemic and the destruction of jobs and living standards.

As with all fundamental social and economic problems facing humanity, the terrible consequences of climate change cannot be averted by appeals to the capitalist class and their state apparatus. Capitalism rests on the exploitation of the working class to provide profits for those who own and control the means of production, including the press barons. Only by wresting that control away from the tiny layer of the super-rich and their political representatives and placing it under the democratic control of the majority, can the moves towards authoritarianism, like the destruction of the environment, be prevented.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**