Protests throughout UK against the Police Bill

Robert Stevens
4 April 2021

Protests against the draconian Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill took place this weekend in more than 25 towns and cities in Britain.

The Police Bill, which effectively criminalises protest, is making its way through Parliament after passing its first two readings. It is expected to return to Parliament in June and be passed due to the Conservative government's 80 seat majority.

The protests were relatively small, with the largest held in London where several thousand people marched from Hyde Park to a rally in Parliament Square. Among those attending were supporters of Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter.

Two protests were held in Bristol this week ahead of the main one Saturday, which around 1,500 attended. Over the last few weeks, police have brutally attacked Police Bill protesters in the city. Avon and Somerset police, backed by "public disorder officers" from neighbouring forces, were mobilised against protesters on Saturday. During the evening, Avon and Somerset police enforced a Section 35 dispersal order over the entirety of Bristol city centre and arrested seven protesters.

Demonstrations numbering between a few hundred and up to 1,000 were held Saturday in Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Northampton, Norwich, Nottingham, Oxford, Cambridge, Plymouth, Portsmouth Aberystwyth, Bath, Bournemouth, Brighton, Cardiff, Derby, Exeter, Folkestone, Kendal, Lancaster, Lincoln and Luton. The mainly young protesters chanted "Kill the Bill!" and Whose streets? Our streets?". There was a proliferation of homemade banners including, "No more police powers", "It's our right to protest", Defend your human right to protest", "No to a police state: Yes to democratic rights,", "I'm not giving up on our rights" and "No protest? No Democracy."

In London, demonstrators proceeded past Buckingham Palace before arriving in Westminster. The Metropolitan Police presence was significantly larger around Whitehall, where Downing Street and some of the main government ministries are located. Later in the day, riot police were sent in to disperse a small number of protesters who remained in Parliament Square. The Metropolitan Police announced Sunday it had made 107 arrests for offences including breach of the peace, violent disorder, assault on police and breaches of Covid legislation.

At the Manchester protest, attended by around 400 people, Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members who spoke called on attendees to join and support the unions as the basis for opposing the Bill. Protesters marched around the city centre, temporarily blocking the main Deansgate thoroughfare with a sit-down protest—and ending with a rally. At around 5.30 p.m. dozens of police officers moved in to disperse people sitting on tram lines and made several arrests.

The organisers of the protests placed the political focus on identity politics, with the fight against the Bill conducted by a "coalition of minorities".

A supposed appeal based on "class" took the inevitable form of a glorification of pro-capitalist trade unions, which will do nothing to oppose the Police Bill, as they have done nothing to oppose any attack on the social and democratic rights of their members. For decades, as a critical bedrock of their suppression of every significant struggle by workers, the unions have faithfully enforced the raft of anti-strike laws that were legislated by the 1980s Tory government and kept in place by the 1997 Labour government throughout its 13 years in office.

There was no organised trade union presence at any of the anti-Police Bill demonstrations, with the odd trade union banner on display brought along by members of various pseudo-left and Stalinist groups.

A number of those speaking at protests condemned

© World Socialist Web Site

the Labour Party, its support for the Tory government during the pandemic and its complicity in the attacks on protesters. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's name was booed at number of the weekend's protests. Labour had originally planned to abstain on the Bill and supports several of its provisions—particularly stiffer sentences for a number of crimes. It only reversed its support following the widespread protests at the police for the brutal attack on the vigil held on London's Clapham Common following the murder of a young woman, Sarah Everhard. A serving Met Police officer was arrested and charged with her murder.

Under conditions in which Labour is widely discredited as a pro-capitalist party of state, Labour's Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), a rump of around 30 "left" MPs, is seeking to provide a political cover. At the London protest, SCG MPs Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Apsana Begum, Clive Lewis and Zarah Sultana spoke. They were joined by Starmer's predecessor as leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who had the party whip removed as part of the right-wing's anti-Semitism witch-hunt.

Corbyn made only the timidest pose of opposition in his speech, standing next to the statue of the pacifist leader of India's independence movement Mahatma Gandhi. Corbyn said, "I want to live in a world of peace and justice, I want to live in a world of human rights and democracy, and I'm prepared to make people feel uncomfortable in the process of defending and advancing our human rights and our justice."

Corbyn's opposition to any struggle based on the mobilisation of the working class was evident in a proposal he made Saturday. In reference to measures in the Police Bill that noise restrictions be placed on demonstrations in the vicinity of parliament, he said to attendees, "Within the privacy of the small number of people in this square can I share an idea with you. How about come Christmas time, if we haven't defeated the legislation by then, a whole bunch of us meet here in Parliament Square, and beautifully and in tune sing Silent Night, to see what happens then."

Corbyn stated that the Police Bill should be taken in the context of a "series of legislation that this government is trying to push through that place [pointing at Parliament] over there: the Spycops Bill; the Overseas Operations Bill."

While saying that he (who remains free of the Labour whip) and the SCG MPs on the platform would vote against the Police Bill and had voted against the Spycops and the Overseas Operations Bill, Corbyn said nothing about Labour's role in allowing the passage of the Spycops Bill, voting for the continuation of the authoritarian Coronavirus Act, and backing Boris Johnson's "herd immunity" government to the hilt during the pandemic.

In allying with the Johnson government, Starmer only took over where Corbyn left off. Before handing the leadership of the party over in March 2020 in his last parliamentary appearance as leader, Corbyn said of Labour's approach to the pandemic, "Our immediate task as the Opposition is to help arrest the spread of the coronavirus, support the government's public health efforts while being constructively critical where we feel it is necessary to improve the official response."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site