

When is a campaign not a campaign? Britain's pseudo-left conceal refusal of trade unions and Labour Party to oppose Police Bill

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21 April 2021

The Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill is set to be pushed through Parliament by the Johnson government as early as June. It represents the culmination of the most serious attack on democratic rights in decades.

It was preceded by a raft of anti-democratic legislation pushed through in the last year, including the “Spy Cops” legislation—the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act—and the Overseas Operations Bill.

The Police Bill empowers police to place the same restrictions on static “public assemblies” as they already can on moving “public processions”. These include restrictions on the location and start and finish times of protests, and the noise being made by protestors. The home secretary is empowered to decide what constitutes “serious disruption to the activities of an organisation which are carried on in the vicinity of a public procession” or “serious disruption to the life of the community” and restrict protests accordingly.

Demonstrations have been held nationwide but have mobilised only a few thousand people—even in London. On Saturday protests against the Bill gathered a 1,000 people at most in London. In some cities only a few dozen people attended.

The small turnouts do not reflect a lack of public opposition to the draconian laws being enacted by a widely hated government. The forces leading the protests comprise pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party, environmental groups including Extinction Rebellion, supporters of Black Lives Matter and numerous groups and individuals promoting identity politics who elevate issues of sexual orientation and gender self-identification above everything else. What unites them all is an insistence that class issues—central to the government’s clampdown on protests—must be rejected.

The campaign against the Police Bill organised by these elements is therefore a political fraud, epitomised by the central lie and political conceit that the Bill is opposed by the trade unions and Labour Party.

The reality is that Labour and the unions have organised nothing against the Bill. Had they even put forward token opposition to it, Labour could have mobilised local branch officials and councillors ensuring that thousands and even tens of thousands were on the protests.

On this basis, the political reality is that the Police Bill is going to pass into law in a few months’ time as there is no constituency within the political elite, including Labour, for the defence of democratic rights.

Labour reluctantly voted against the Police Bill clear in the knowledge that the Conservative government’s 80 seat majority will ensure its passage anyway. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer had originally planned for Labour to only abstain against it, thus giving it tacit support to go through unchallenged. Only last month did Starmer switch to opposing it, in the wake of the police attack on a vigil in London for Sarah Everard. Everard,

a young woman, had been murdered just weeks earlier. By the time of the vigil, it had emerged that a London Metropolitan Police constable and firearms officer was due to stand trial charged with her kidnap and murder.

Labour opposed the Bill based on an amendment at its March 16 second reading. This only confirmed that its main concern was that the Bill’s provisions were not draconian enough. Starmer’s amendment opposed the Bill, “notwithstanding the need for a police covenant and for tougher sentences for serious crimes, including child murder, terrorism and dangerous driving, and for assaults on emergency service workers...”

The amendment said nothing in opposition to the attacks on the rights of protest and assembly, but said it should be opposed only “because the Bill *rushes changes* to protest law...”

The amendment insisted the Bill was not authoritarian enough regarding “tougher sentences for serious crimes, including child murder, terrorism and dangerous driving, and for assaults on emergency service workers,” before focusing on crimes centred on gender issues. It “fails to introduce a single new measure specifically designed to tackle the epidemic of violence against women and is therefore an abusers’ charter since domestic abuse rates have spiked and victims of rape are facing the lowest prosecution rates on record, and because the Bill fails to criminalise street harassment, fails to make misogyny a hate crime, fails to raise minimum sentences for rape or stalking, and fails to give whole life orders to those found guilty of abduction and sexual assault and murder of a stranger.”

Trades Union Congress (TUC) leader Frances O’Grady opposed the Bill on similar grounds when speaking on the BBC’s *Politics Live* on March 16. She declared the “focus should be on women and ending violence and not just violence but harassment and everyday sexism... that is what politicians should be focused on... a real strategy to end that behaviour”.

Her only citation of other “nasty bits in this Bill” focused on its “picking on gypsy and traveller communities...”

Raising such legitimate concerns about the ongoing brutal treatment of gypsy and traveller communities is the equivalent of a magician using sleight of hand and distraction to conceal the fact that the TUC is doing nothing to oppose the wholesale evisceration of the right to protest—which is the crux of the Bill and which is directed above all at the working class.

Those condemning the government’s persecution and harassment of gypsy and traveller communities omit Labour’s own record in its role leading local councils in major urban areas. Earlier this month, Charlotte Nichols, Starmer’s shadow minister for women and equalities, had to apologise for taking part in distributing a leaflet campaigning for upcoming local elections in her Warrington North constituency raising the necessity of “dealing with Traveller incursions”.

The TUC only became genuinely animated after riot police stepped up

their repression against anti-Bill protests in Bristol during the week of March 21. On March 26, the TUC published a statement representing “the main trade unions representing some 100,000 workers across the Bristol area.” It said nothing about the actions of the police in attacking demonstrators, but condemned instead “actions of a minority” of protesters that “were in stark contrast to the peaceful demonstration against the Bill earlier in the day.”

In their efforts to proclaim the unions as the only organisations that can defeat the Bill, *Socialist Worker*, the SWP’s newspaper, published a piece on April 11, “How workers battled to kill the bill in 1971.”

The article argued that just as a Tory government in 1971 had passed a reactionary anti-union Bill, the Industrial Relations Act 1971, which was opposed by workers in mass “Kill the Bill” protests—so once again the unions can come to the rescue.

This is despite their acknowledging the role of the trade union bureaucracy in attempting to sabotage the Kill the Bill protests in the early 1970s. The SWP points out that at “the TUC conference in March 1971 leaders refused to make it a condition of TUC membership that unions should not cooperate with the new anti-union laws,” adding, “It wasn’t until September 1971, after the bill became law, that the TUC shifted to ‘instruct’ rather than ‘advise’ members not to register under the Act.”

The SWP also carefully evades the fact that when the Edward Heath’s Conservative government fell in 1974, after being defeated in the February general election, following years of mass strikes by miners and others, it was replaced by Harold Wilson’s Labour government. Seeking to placate a combative working class, Wilson repealed the Industrial Relations Act, but replaced it with the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 that kept intact the bulk of the Tories anti-worker legislation.

More fundamental still, the fact that the SWP have to turn to events that took place *50 years ago* in terms of when the unions and Labour were last involved in any successful struggles of the working class indicates what the SWP tries to conceal today.

The SWP, as with the entire pseudo-left whose members comprise a significant section of the well-heeled officialdom of these organisations, present the trade unions as essentially unchanged since the period when they were associated with a struggle to secure reforms. Since the 1970s, the unions have overseen an unbroken series of betrayals spanning decades.

The transformation of the unions as defensive organisations of the working class into corporate tools of management is not a British phenomenon, but confirms that the globalisation of production has stripped away the basis for reforms based on a nationally organised labour market and the trade unions ability to combine a defence of capitalism with securing even the most meagre concessions on behalf of their members.

A universal feature of the Kill the Bill protests is the virtual absence of representation from the trade unions and Labour Party. The occasional trade union, Constituency Labour Party and trades council banner is invariably brought by one or two members of the pseudo-left and Stalinist groups in a pathetic attempt to keep up the fiction that there is a fight being waged by these organisations.

Karen Reissmann, a long standing leading member of the Socialist Workers Party and a member of the National Executive Committee of the largest public sector union, Unison, said at the Manchester protest last week, “ It is important that trade unions become a *bigger part of this movement* and join. We’ve brought our union banner here today because it’s important that the government knows that the six million trade unionists in this country know that if this bill is passed it will restrict our ability to work to fight.”

Six million members represented by one Karen Reissmann.

In an unintended indictment of the role of the bureaucracy, the SWP writes, “The main focus of resistance is presently on the streets, rather

than in workplaces.” For the SWP, boosting of the Kill the Bill movement on the “streets” is an attempt to ingratiate themselves closer to the myriad petty-bourgeois advocates of identity politics that presently dominate the protests.

An insidious role in facilitating the passage of the Police Bill is being played by the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), a rump of around 30 “left” Labour MPs. While Jeremy Corbyn was Labour leader from 2015-20, he and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell led the organisation. Last November, Corbyn had the Labour whip removed as part of Starmer’s anti-Semitism witch-hunt, but Corbyn remains a leading SCG figure.

On March 30, three weeks after the Bill’s March 9 introduction to Parliament, the SCG published a brief statement of 10 shortly worded paragraphs. It was signed by 28 Labour MPs, six Labour supporting House of Lords peers, plus Corbyn.

While making token references to the attack on the historic right to protest, the main concern of these stalwart defenders of the capitalist order and of the Labour Party itself was revealed in their fearful warning that “Legislation seeking to suppress the right to protest will only prompt more protests and increase conflict.”

The SCG statement is a carefully crafted avoidance of the truth. It conceals the fact that Labour, the party to which they owe unswerving loyalty, has endorsed virtually the entirety of the Tories’ legislative agenda. Its statement explains that “the government aims to weaken people’s ability to oppose its unjust and unpopular policies. This is why members of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs have consistently voted against the Overseas Operations Bill, the Spy Cops Bill and continue to be at the forefront of opposition in Parliament to the Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.”

The fact remains that Labour allowed the passage of these same Bills and did nothing to mobilise the working class in opposition. On the Overseas Operations Bill, Labour abstained on its second reading before registering a formal vote against at its last reading—knowing it would pass anyway. For all Corbyn’s crowing, nearly half (16) of the SCG’s then meagre 34 MPs did not vote against the Overseas Operations Bill which is a licence for soldiers to maim, torture and kill.

Regarding the Spy Cops Bill, Starmer instructed his MPs to abstain and just 34 MPs, mainly from the SCG, voted against the third reading.

The fight against the Police Bill and the drive to authoritarian rule can only be fought on the basis of the independent political mobilisation of the working class, the only social force that is committed to the defence of democratic rights. In this vital struggle, the Socialist Equality Party explained in a statement published last month, workers are not only up against the Tory government and the entire state apparatus, but are in mortal conflict with the Labour Party, the trade unions and their myriad pseudo-left apologists.



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