

UK government adds more draconian measures to Police Bill, aimed at suppression of working class opposition

Ioan Petrescu
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The Johnson government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is in the final stages of its passage through Parliament, and set to become legislation early next year.

The Bill, which already included massive attacks on the right to protest, was updated on November 11 and in December with even more draconian measures in a series of post-debate amendments—aimed at suppressing all social opposition as the government goes ahead with its murderous pandemic policies and austerity agenda.

A further 18 pages were undemocratically added to the bill *after* it had passed through the Commons, and after the second reading in the House of Lords.

The bill was first introduced to Parliament in March 2021 and grants wide-ranging discretion and powers to police officers. It adds “noise” if it is deemed to cause “serious unease, alarm or distress” to bystanders to the list of intervenable offences under the Public Order Act 1986, which enables police to restrict a protest if they deem it risks “serious public disorder”.

The new amendments, inserted at the last minute while the bill is being scrutinised in the House of Lords, were spearheaded by Home Secretary Priti Patel. They follow the widespread disruption caused by environmental activists from Insulate Britain, who blockaded major motorways and roads, including in London, in the lead-up to the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow.

One amendment to the legislation is a provision for Serious Disruption Prevention Order (SDPO). It represents one of the most egregious assaults on freedom of speech and assembly anywhere in the world.

An SDPO can be imposed by the courts on anyone convicted of a “protest-related offence”. This category is extremely broad. It includes “infractions” such as holding hands during a protest or possessing superglue near a demonstration.

Under Amendment 342M.2.iii of the new legislation, SDPOs can be imposed on people whose activities “were likely to result in serious disruption”. The chilling meaning of this is that one does not even have to have been previously convicted of a crime or to have ever caused “disruption” to be subject to a SDPOs. It's enough that the state deems that someone's

activities *might* cause disruption.

Writing in the *i*, Ian Dunt noted, “Once the order is imposed, it eradicates your rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Those under an order can be forced to report to the authorities whenever the courts demand it, as often as they demand it. They must ‘present themselves to a particular person at a particular place at... particular times on particular days’”.

“They can also be prohibited from being at a certain place, or possessing certain items, or participating in certain activities, or socialising with certain people, for up to two years. They can be blocked from using the internet to ‘encourage’ people to ‘carry out activities related to a protest’. Someone who used their social media account to promote a demonstration could be found in breach of the order.”

The Open Democracy campaigning web site noted that the amendments around “serious disruption” are actually “protest-banning orders, which can be imposed on people if they have previously been convicted of what the amendment calls a ‘protest-related offence’—or even if they have just been to two protests in the past five years in which they carried out activities that could have caused serious disruption.”

Further draconian measures inserted into the revised Bill are around stop and search. Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, police can use this power if they have “reasonable grounds for suspecting” someone is carrying certain items or something which could be used to violate certain laws, like burglary or theft. The bill proposes that police will be able to deploy a stop and search “without suspicion” if they claim it could avoid “serious disruption” or a “public nuisance”. They can be initiated “whether or not the constable has any grounds for suspecting that the person... is carrying a prohibited object”. It is a carte blanche for invasive police action.

Those who refuse to give themselves up to this intrusion face the full force of the law. Anyone found guilty of obstructing a police officer in the context of a stop and search during a protest faces a jail term “not exceeding 51 weeks”. This could also put at risk legal observers on protests carrying “bust

cards”—cards with advice and information on what to do if a protester is arrested, usually including the names and numbers of solicitors who can help them.

Amendment 319A creates an offence of “locking on” or carrying equipment which might facilitate it. It targets anyone who attaches themselves to “a person, to an object or to land”. These all come with a potential 51-week prison sentence. There is no definition of the term “attach”, so it could equally be applied to protestors who link arms during a sit-down protest, or even hold hands. It could apply to someone found with superglue while walking past a protest, or to the disabled activists who chained their wheelchairs to traffic lights over benefits cuts.

While some of the amendments take immediate aim at the Insulate Britain protests, their main target is the working class.

As the legislation was sent to the House of Lords, the government told the second chamber, via a private letter, that it intends to “introduce a new offence of interfering with the operation of key infrastructure, such as the strategic road network, railways, sea ports, airports, oil refineries and printing presses, carrying a maximum penalty of 12 months’ imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both”.

Amendment 319C criminalises “willful obstruction of a highway”. Amendment 319D criminalises the obstruction of “major transport works”, including roads, rail lines or airport runways. The ruling class will not hesitate to use these provisions in the case of a major strike that brings to a halt rail or road traffic. Just last month, anti-deportation activists managed to prevent deportation flight to Jamaica by blocking the road leading to the detention centre near Gatwick Airport. With the police bill such these tactics will be outlawed.

The attacks contained in the expanded bill are being forced through alongside a raft of other legislation curtailing democratic rights. These include the Nationality and Borders Bill, the Elections Bill and the Judicial Review and Courts Bill. Last month, the government quietly introducing new amendments into the Nationality and Borders Bill as it passes through report stage. Among these were measures further strengthening the state’s ability to revoke citizenship without even needing to give notice of their actions.

These assaults on democratic rights are part of a worldwide offensive by the ruling class, aimed at silencing any opposition from the working class. The bourgeoisie is seeking to stifle dissent under conditions of a worsening political and social crisis, deepened by the profit-driven and criminal reopening of workplaces and schools in the middle of a global pandemic.

The Police Bill is in line with similar profoundly anti-democratic moves in the US and Australia to effectively strip millions of working class, poor and vulnerable people of the right to vote. It follows the attacks on the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) by the German state, who have designated the Trotskyist party as a “left-wing extremist” organisation because of its opposition to

capitalism. Ever-more staggering levels of social inequality, intensified by the pandemic, are incompatible with democratic forms of capitalist rule.

The Police Bill was met with demonstrations and protests in many cities when first introduced. By July, 600,000 people had signed a collective petition organised by civil liberty and human rights groups against it being legislated. This initiative was framed as an appeal to the government to change course. The Tories predictably ignored the objections raised by a swathe of the British public, hundreds of NGOs and academics, three UN Special Rapporteurs and even Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights. Instead, they have doubled down on their frenzied law-and-order agenda, to better impose the dictates of the big banks and corporations.

There is no constituency for democratic rights among the political representatives of the capitalist class. Despite their vast resources and millions of members, the Labour Party and trade unions have done nothing in opposition to the Police Bill. Labour even 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, by a Metropolitan Police officer.

The fight against the Police Bill and the drive to authoritarian rule can only be fought through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, the only social force committed to the defence of democratic rights.



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