

UN and Human Rights Watch accuse UK of grave attacks on democratic rights

Thomas Scripps
27 November 2023

The UK government has launched a systematic assault on democratic rights, banning demonstrations, making major inroads on freedom of speech, and flagrantly disregarding human rights laws. The turn to authoritarian rule by the British ruling class is so pronounced that it is drawing criticisms from human rights monitors.

A statement by Human Rights Watch published last week notes, “The right to protest peacefully is under threat, as pro-Palestine protesters and climate activists have experienced recently, and the country has joined the global race to the bottom regarding migration and refugees.”

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Human Rights Watch’s UK Director Yasmine Ahmed was blunt. “With previous governments there was always an attempt to at least try to appear as if they were complying with domestic or international human rights law and to respect the courts and human rights institutions. Now there is no attempt to do this—in fact, it’s quite the opposite.”

Describing the government’s actions as starting “to look very much like authoritarianism,” Ahmed went on, “Not only is the government talking about ripping up domestic human rights law and ignoring its international obligations, it has launched an open attack on the right to peacefully demonstrate, is locking up climate protesters, criminalizing refugees and has given the police unprecedented powers over citizens.”

Ahmed condemned a proposal by the UK government to “disapply” the Human Rights Act to a bill that would send asylum seekers to Rwanda, in violation of a UK Supreme Court ruling.

Some of the most egregious actions have been taken against protests over Israel’s genocide. Last month, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak threatened demonstrators, “I’d just remind everyone that Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organization. People should not be supporting Hamas and we will make sure that we hold people to account if they are.” The UK police have arrested hundreds of people for demonstrating in opposition to the genocide in Gaza—often merely for displaying signs.

Despite government threats, millions of people have protested in the UK against the genocide, with up to one million marching in London on November 11.

The UK government’s efforts to criminalize opposition to Israel’s genocide in Gaza is part of a global assault on democratic rights. In France, Germany and other European countries, authorities have attempted to ban protests. In the United States, the Senate passed a resolution accusing demonstrators of “expressing solidarity with terrorists,” and several universities have moved to ban Students for Justice in Palestine.

Human Rights Watch generally keeps in close step with imperialist foreign policy. For it to make such stark comments about the UK is a sign of how rapidly the British ruling class is junking democratic forms of rule in its lurch to the right. Significantly, Ahmed warns, “This approach... discredits and undermines our ability to hold other human rights violators to account on the international stage.”

Criticisms of the British government’s draconian sentences for climate protestors and broader attacks on democratic rights have also been made by the United Nations.

In April, two protesters associated with Just Stop Oil, Morgan Trowland and Marcus Decker, were sentenced to three- and two-year sentences, respectively, for causing a “public nuisance” the previous October. The pair scaled the Dartford Crossing bridge east of London to unfurl a banner, causing traffic to be stopped for over 24 hours while they were removed.

Appealing against their sentences, Daniel Friedman KC noted they were “the longest ever handed down in a case of non-violent protest in this country in modern times,” and warned that they were “likely to have a ‘chilling effect’ on all protest rather than this type of protest.”

The appeal was rejected in July. Lady Chief Justice Sue Carr acknowledged the jail terms were “well beyond previous sentences imposed for this type of offending,” but countered that the judges were following “Parliament’s will” as expressed in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and

Courts Act, which includes a “public nuisance offence for what obviously will include non-violent protest behaviour, with a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment.”

The ruling prompted a letter of concern from the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, Ian Fry, which was sent to the UK government on August 15.

Reported by BBC news last week, the letter references the jailed protestors and expresses concern about “the exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.” Fry adds that he is “gravely concerned about the potential flow-on effect that the severity of the sentences could have on civil society and the work of activists.”

The letter argues that the Public Order Act “appears to be a direct attack on the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly.” It asks “why... it was necessary to introduce and pass the Public Order Act and how both the Public Order Act and the sentencing of Mr Decker and Mr Trowland are compatible with international norms and standards.”

He notes that a previous, December 22, 2022 letter asking how the Public Order Act could be said to comply with international human rights law, signed by himself and four other UN special rapporteurs, remains unanswered.

His own letter suffered the same fate, despite specifically requesting a response within 60 days. He told the BBC this was “troubling” and reflected “a general disregard for human rights concerns by the current government.”

After the BBC published its article, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak delivered his bellicose reply to the UN official, posting on X: “Those who break the law should feel the full force of it. It’s entirely right that selfish protestors intent on causing misery to the hard-working majority face tough sentences.”

Only a few years ago, the UN and organisations like Human Rights Watch felt able to give a free pass to the imperialist governments’ claims to be the guardians of an “international rules-based order.” This only ever meant a regime of imperialist interests dressed up in the language of humanitarianism and human rights.

But the violence and authoritarianism with which governments are increasingly forced to rule over deeply hostile populations is such that the fiction is falling apart. The wholesale support among the imperialist governments and major opposition parties for Israel’s genocide in Gaza has rapidly accelerated this process.

Although relatively small numbers of climate activists using peaceful disruption tactics have served as a pretext for dictatorial new laws, their intended application is far wider. That fact has been made clear by the ferocious denunciations of the hundreds of thousands attending national

demonstrations against Israel’s genocide in Gaza, and by the passing of laws directly targeting striking workers. The ruling class is gearing up for a massive confrontation with the working class.

While Human Rights Watch and the UN specifically reference “this current government,” there is no difference between the incumbent Tories and the Labour Party opposition.

Labour has supported the crackdown on climate protestors, fully aware that it was being used as the spearhead of a campaign aimed at, and now mounted, against opposition to imperialism and war. Last April, Shadow Justice Secretary Steve Reed told the government to “stop standing idly by” and “get on with their jobs” acting against Just Stop Oil protestors. That October, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer declared his support for longer sentences, saying he had pushed for the same while director of public prosecutions (2008—2013).

When it comes to the Palestinian protests, Labour spearheaded the “left anti-Semitism” witch-hunt and has since advanced itself as the most dedicated supporters of the Metropolitan Police, which has already arrested hundreds of protestors and is asking for the tools to go further.

Nor is the turn to police-state rule a uniquely British phenomenon. Germany has carried out a ferocious anti-democratic crackdown on climate protestors over the last years, serving as a trial run for the suppression of pro-Palestinian demonstrators today. This is mirrored in France. The frontal assault on democratic rights is the universal response of a ruling class that feels itself isolated in the face of mass opposition and has no answer other than state repression.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact