

As it supports Gaza genocide, UK government wages war on democratic rights

Thomas Scripps
9 February 2024

On Thursday, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak released a one-minute video statement pledging a crackdown on the mass protest movement against the genocide in Gaza.

Sunak, whose own hands are dripping in blood, denounced protesters for “appalling examples of antisemitism, violent intimidation and the glorification of terrorism.” He threatened that he had “asked the police what powers they need to bring order to our streets.”

Announcing initial measures targeting the use of flares and fireworks on demonstrations, face coverings and climbing on war memorials, he concluded, “Those who abuse their freedom to protest undermine public safety and our democratic values. And I will give the police the powers they need to crack down on this intimidating and appalling behaviour.”

These are comments worthy of a police state. They signal a further assault on democratic rights in the UK, the corollary to ruling elite’s support for Israel’s war of annihilation against the Palestinians.

Arrests and detentions carried out in recent months under “hate crime” and “anti-terror” legislation make clear the right-wing, dictatorial agenda of the Conservative government, which is backed to the hilt by the opposition Labour Party.

Among those affected—all in connection with actions taken over Gaza—are journalist Craig Murray; co-founder of the Palestine Solidarity Committee Tony Greenstein; founder of the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Committee Mick Napier; and members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), Revolutionary Communist Group and International Marxist Tendency. Many had their homes raided and electronic devices seized. Stringent bail conditions have been imposed.

These arrests, targeting members of left tendencies, are not only acts of political intimidation. They are preparation for a much broader campaign of political repression of the type announced by Sunak.

The arrests made, especially on protests in London, have relied on a sophisticated and expensive system of state

surveillance. Roughly £22 million has been spent so far on “Operation Brocks,” the Metropolitan Police’s “response to the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza and its impact on London.”

At each major demonstration, information from facial recognition-enabled CCTV, police spotters and undercover officers is fed back to the Special Operations Room in Lambeth, where the police have provided senior prosecution lawyers from the Crown Prosecution Service their own operational desk. The Home Secretary’s Lead Special Advisors for Hate Crime and Media and Communications have also been given weekly access.

An open letter sent by the Islamic Human Rights Commission raises “serious concerns” about this “front-loading of the charging and prosecution process,” which it “understand[s]... is the first time measures such as these have been put in place by the Metropolitan Police.”

The intention is to outlaw opposition to British imperialism and its support for the genocide in Gaza, criminalising opinions held by millions by making an example of selected individuals and organisations. A key part of this campaign is to brand left-wing politics as “extremist,” subjecting activists to surveillance, harassment, censorship and arrest with the use of deeply anti-democratic counter-terror legislation.

Years have been spent preparing these plans, which have now been activated and centred on the eruption of protest over Israel’s war, amid an explosive social and economic crisis.

In 2019, the UK government’s Commission for Countering Extremism published a report on “Violent extremist tactics and the ideology of the sectarian far left.”

Declaring “revolutionary workerist” sentiment “extremist,” the report listed as examples the beliefs that “The greatest threat to democracy has always come from the far right,” “Zionism is a form of racism,” “Mainstream newspapers and TV channels tell lies to protect the ruling class” and “Protesting against the Government makes the world a better place.”

The authors concluded that the “beliefs of [far-left sectarian groups] could plausibly provide... a motivation to break the law,” including with “lethal... terrorist actions.”

Less than a year later, a Counter Terrorism Policing “guidance document” on extremism was leaked which included groups like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Socialist Party (SP), the Stop the War Coalition and Extinction Rebellion alongside fascist terror groups.

In 2021, the government announced a review into “left-wing extremism” to be conducted by former Labour MP John Woodcock, who was recruited by the Tories after resigning from the party and insisting that then-leader Jeremy Corbyn “would pose a clear risk to UK national security as prime minister.”

Woodcock specifically named the SWP as a threat and warned of a “blind spot in Britain to the prospect of progressive extremism—that is, unacceptable disruption or even violence carried out in the name of progressive causes.”

Late last year, it was reported that Communities Secretary Michael Gove is close to finalising a review of “non-violent extremism,” which will be defined as “the promotion or advancement of any ideology which aims to overturn or undermine the UK’s system of parliamentary democracy, its institutions and values” or to “threaten the rights of individuals or create a permissive environment for radicalisation, hate crime and terrorism.”

These blanket definitions make clear the widespread repression planned for the Gaza protests and also for broader opposition to capitalism and war.

Government ministers, echoed by their Labour counterparts, have been demanding as much since the first national demonstration last October.

The police initially refrained from launching such a frontal assault, not out of any concern for democratic rights, but out of fear that the political and legislative preparations have not yet been made. They told the government so, and the prime minister has listened. Sunak’s speech Thursday is a signal that the ruling class will provide all the support necessary for a rapid expansion of the police-state measures already in place.

This is above all in recognition of the fact that the principal restraint placed on the anti-war movement to this point—the perspective of its current Stop the War Coalition leadership—is wearing thin. Directions to the millions of workers and youth searching for a way to stop the genocide to appeal to their MPs, above all the Labour Party, and the trade unions, as well as to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, have proved to be futile in the face of Israel’s escalating assault.

The bankruptcy of these forces confirms the essential

experience of millions of workers during last year’s strike wave, as they saw Starmer’s Labour Party come out openly against them and the trade union bureaucracy sell out one struggle after another.

The ruling class depends on the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to act as its industrial and political police force. They know that its discrediting, including “left” representatives such as Corbyn who have refused to fight a single attack launched by the Labour right-wing, raises the prospect of explosive class conflicts outside of its control.

It is in anticipation of anti-war protesters and ever broader sections of the working class, especially its younger generation, looking for new avenues of struggle that the state is preparing savage repression.

Even before the outbreak of the Gaza protests, the UK government had passed the dictatorial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) and Public Order Act (2023) eviscerating the right to protest, under which hundreds of climate activists were arrested and charged over just five weeks last year.

These were followed by the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act (2023), giving employers the tools to break strikes in key sections of the economy by forcing workers to cross picket lines on pain of dismissal.

The mass movement against the Israeli genocide has accelerated these moves toward police state rule.

The same issue confronts workers and youth in country after country, where the police have carried out vicious assaults on demonstrators amid a relentless propaganda campaign slandering opponents of Israel’s genocidal war as antisemites. This must be met by the building of an international, socialist, anti-war movement in the working class. Only such a movement can take on and defeat the imperialist ruling elites that are backing Israel’s genocide, waging war against Russia in Ukraine and preparing for war against Iran and China.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact