

The proscription of Palestine Action and the struggle against the Starmer government

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The Socialist Equality Party denounces the Starmer government's proscription of Palestine Action as a fundamental attack on the democratic rights of the working class. From midnight tonight, membership of or any expression of support for the organisation will be a criminal offence.

As a party advocating the mass political mobilisation of the working class, the SEP does not endorse the methods of individual protest pursued by Palestine Action which are incapable of ending the genocide in Gaza or combating British imperialism's collusion with it. Nevertheless, we call for workers and young people in Britain and throughout the world to take a stand against state repression.

Defining an organisation of young people peacefully opposing Israel's mass murder and ethnic cleansing of Gaza and the UK's complicity as terrorists is aimed at criminalising the millions in Britain and internationally who have taken to the streets to protest this historic crime.

Britain has sent weapons and mounted RAF surveillance flights to help the Israeli state kill tens of thousands of Palestinians, mostly women and children. Now the real criminals, the Labour government and all the main opposition parties, want to silence opponents of genocide and the assault on jobs, wages and essential services required to fuel their war plans in the Middle East and beyond.

The state is giving itself the power to imprison its political opponents en masse, with many already in the dock.

At least 56 PalAction members are presently being tried for offenses related to their peaceful protests at arms factories and military installations, such as criminal damage and trespass. At least 13 members have been arrested since June 20. In many of their cases, the prosecution has already claimed a "terrorist connection".

United Nations special rapporteurs, legal experts, civil rights groups and dozens of public figures have pointed to the "chilling effect" on free speech of defining PalAction as a terrorist group.

The Terrorism Act (2000) makes it a criminal offence for a person to belong to, invite support for, recklessly express support for, or arrange a meeting in support of a proscribed organisation—all carrying a maximum sentence of 14 years imprisonment. It is also an offense to wear clothing or carry

articles arousing reasonable suspicion of membership or support, or to publish an image of an article such as a flag or logo indicating support or membership.

PalAction has a quarter of a million followers on its X/Twitter account. And millions more have opposed the targeting of the group, often showing their solidarity with the invocation, "We are all Palestine Action!" Following proscription, this will be an illegal act. With no protection for journalists, even reporting campaigns in the organisation's defence could open the door to prosecution.

Denials by the government of a broader intent to criminalise anti-Gaza protests are worthless. Others targeted for possible imprisonment include SOAS student Sarah for publicly defending the right of the Palestinian people to resist occupation and Mo Chara of Irish hip-hop group Kneecap. An investigation has also been launched against punk rapper Bob Vylan after he made anti-genocide comments at Glastonbury.

Monday July 7 will see two of the leaders of the Stop the War Coalition, Chris Nineham and Ben Jamal, who also heads the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, face charges for Public Order offences for taking part in a peaceful protest against the Gaza genocide. They were among 77 arrested on January 18, after the Metropolitan Police imposed restrictions on a previously approved march route. MPs Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell were both called in for police interview.

As the Socialist Equality Party warned, "[I]f non-violent sabotage by individual protesters is designated terrorist, then what of strikes by seafarers and waterside workers, or factory and logistics workers who boycott the supply of weapons and other equipment to the Israeli war machine, as has been done by French, Greek and Italian dockers?"

Democratic rights cannot be defended by capitalist parties or the courts

The government is turning to authoritarianism because its agenda of enriching the financial oligarchy and waging war cannot be pursued democratically. This was demonstrated by

the crisis of the Starmer government over the welfare bill, following its earlier reversal on winter fuel payments. Labour was forced to substantially reduce planned £5 billion cuts so that a rebellion by some of its MPs fuelled by fear of a popular backlash could be neutralised.

The escalation of police repression in the immediate aftermath of Starmer's embarrassing setback is to reassure the ruling elite that there will be no further retreats from the assault on the working class needed to ramp up military spending to 5 percent of GDP while funnelling social wealth into the grasping hands of the banks and major corporations.

This historic attack on the democratic rights of the working class cannot be opposed by appeals to any political representatives or institutions of capitalist rule.

Just 26 MPs voted against proscribing PalAction, and only 11 Peers when it moved to the House of Lords. On Friday, Mr Justice Chamberlain confirmed the total lack of any constituency for democratic rights within the ruling class by refusing to grant lawyers from Palestine Action's request for interim relief from the order until a judicial review can be applied for later this month.

Neither can the handful of Labour lefts, alone or in combination with the Greens, mount a political defence of the democratic and social rights of the working class. One day after the parliamentary vote, leading rebel MP Zarah Sultana announced she was quitting Labour to join the five Independents grouped around former party leader Jeremy Corbyn and would be the co-leader of a new left party.

Talk of such a new party has been ongoing since Corbyn was removed as Labour leader in 2020 but has been endlessly put off because Corbyn is desperate to avoid any action that could provide a vehicle for workers to wage a genuine political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, as opposed to seeking vainly to push it leftwards.

Should such a party be formed, it would be led by the very forces who refused to fight the Blairite right and the Tories, including opposing the "left antisemitism" witch-hunt which has laid the basis for the present criminalisation of opposition to genocide. Its function would be to channel into neutered parliamentary appeals the vast opposition to war and austerity.

The historic transformation of the Labour Party and the fight for a socialist party of the working class

The necessary struggle against Starmer's government cannot be answered by a harking back to a reformist past and the creation of a (miniature) Labour Party Mark II.

In 1901 the fight for the formation of the Labour Party began in earnest in response to the Taff Vale judgement making trade unions liable for losses incurred by the employers due to

strikes, which would have left workers powerless in face of the dictatorship of big business. Today it is Labour, relying on the support of the trade union bureaucracy, that is imposing attacks on democratic rights and on the working class worse even than those of the Tory government it replaced.

Such a fundamental transformation cannot be attributed to a few bad leaders. Rather Starmer, a former human rights lawyer turned right-wing zealot, and his government are the end product of a fundamental shift within the very foundations of world capitalism.

The development of globalised production has ended any possibility of the labour bureaucracy, historically rooted in the nation state, combining a defence of the capitalist profit system with securing limited reforms to maintain social peace. Eliminating all the past gains won by workers and imposing austerity is now a precondition for successfully pursuing the trade and military war agenda of British imperialism.

For this reason, the defence of fundamental democratic rights, workers' living standards, and the fight against genocide and war is only possible through the adoption of a new axis of struggle—socialist internationalism.

Capitalism is being driven into an existential crisis by its inherent contradictions, between an interconnected system of production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states based on upholding private ownership of the means of production. To maintain its rule and immense privileges, the bourgeoisie in every imperialist country must wage trade and military war abroad and class war at home to ensure national competitiveness against their rivals. This finds its most developed expression in Donald Trump's establishing of a presidential dictatorship in the United States.

But, as is demonstrated by the eruption of mass opposition to Trump, the same contradictions are driving millions into struggle and provide the objective basis for a unified counter-offensive by the working class internationally against the descent by the ruling elite in every country into dictatorship and war.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for workers to defend democratic rights by class struggle means. This requires a systematic industrial and political mobilisation against the Starmer government, waged by rank-and-file organisations independent of the trade union bureaucracy, and the urgent and necessary formation of a new workers' party on genuinely socialist foundations, the Socialist Equality Party.



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