

UK Labour government doubles down on criminalising opposition to Gaza genocide

Robert Stevens
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Britain's Labour government has insisted there will be no retreat from its onslaught on democratic rights following the mass arrests over the weekend of people opposing the proscription of the Palestine Action (PA).

The group was proscribed in early July under the Terrorism Act. The order 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 Palestine Action—all carrying a maximum sentence of 14 years imprisonment. Wearing clothing or displaying an article that suggest support is punishable by up to six months in prison.

Since then over 700 peaceful protesters have been arrested mainly for holding up signs reading, “I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action.” Over 530 were arrested for this on Saturday alone in Parliament Square.

Amnesty International UK's chief executive Sacha Deshmukh denounced the arrests, stating, “The protesters in Parliament Square were not inciting violence and it is entirely disproportionate to the point of absurdity to be treating them as terrorists.

“Instead of criminalising peaceful demonstrators, the government should be focusing on taking immediate and unequivocal action to put a stop to Israel's genocide and ending any risk of UK complicity in it.”

Responding to growing opposition to the ban and the Labour government's clampdown on opposition, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told the BBC Monday, “There may be people who are objecting to proscription who don't know the full nature of this organisation, because of court restrictions on reporting while serious prosecutions are under way. But it's really important that no-one is in any doubt that this is not a non-violent organisation.”

Victims Minister Alex Davies-Jones denounced the group for having “violently carried out criminal damage to RAF aircraft [and] we have credible reports of them targeting Jewish-owned businesses here in the United Kingdom, and there are other reasons, which we can't disclose because of national security”. This repeats the claim made by Prime Minister Keir Starmer at Labour's ruling National Executive

Committee last month, according to the *Times*.

It is no surprise that Labour is resorting to slanderous claims that Palestine Action is antisemitic. Starmer's cabinet are veterans of the “left antisemitism” witch-hunt used to discredit former leader Jeremy Corbyn and drive out his supporters.

Palestine Action co-founder Huda Ammori denounced the attacks, saying, “Yvette Cooper and No 10's claim that Palestine Action is a violent organisation is false and defamatory and even disproven by the government's own intelligence assessment of Palestine Action's activities…

“It was revealed in court during my ongoing legal challenge to the ban that the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre's (JTAC'S) assessment acknowledges that 'Palestine Action does not advocate for violence against persons' and that the 'majority' of its activities 'would not be classified as terrorism'.

“Spraying red paint on war planes is not terrorism. Disrupting Israel's largest weapons manufacturer, Elbit Systems, by trespassing on their sites in Britain is not terrorism. It is the Israeli Defense Forces and all those who arm and enable their war crimes who are the terrorists.”

Evidence is emerging that the proscription of Palestine Action was a key demand of the Trump administration, which leads the imperialist backing for Netanyahu's far-right regime.

On March 30, Trump labelled people who sprayed graffiti reading “Free Gaza” and “Free Palestine” on a clubhouse at his Trump Turnberry golf resort in Scotland as “terrorists”. In reference to Trump's plan to establish a Gaza “riviera” resort as part the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland, the clubhouse was daubed with the words “Gaza is not for sale”.

This week, Declassified UK investigative journalist and chief reporter John McEvoy published replies from Downing Street to his Freedom of Information requests for the full minutes and briefing notes of Starmer's calls with Trump on March 11 and 30 and “all references to Palestine Action in both phone calls.” The Cabinet Office refused to hand over

any material, admitting it “holds information of relevance” but claiming an exemption from releasing it.

Downing Street would “neither confirm nor deny if the specific information... is held,” citing national security considerations.

The proscription of Palestine Action makes clear the chasm that exists between Labour’s government of war and austerity and mass popular sentiment. Starmer’s insistence that protesters continue to be arrested under the Terrorism Act and face the full force of the law indicates its intention to carry out the most vicious attacks on the working class of any post-war government.

This is a prime minister in thrall to Trump, a would-be Führer who is now enacting a military takeover of the US capital Washington D.C. in a massive step towards the establishment of a fascistic dictatorship in the US.

Labour, however, is not imposing its draconian legislation from a position of strength. The government is widely despised by millions of workers and youth for its policies of austerity, backing for genocide and onslaught on democratic rights. Starmer’s own ratings are at a record low for any prime minister of the modern era—even below those of the hated Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair.

This accounts for the concerns in sections of the ruling class, including among Labour MPs who initially backed the proscription, about the course the government has embarked upon.

Labour peer Peter Hain, who held senior posts in the Blair government, told the *Guardian* Wednesday “It will end in tears for the government. We are seeing retired magistrates, retired and serving doctors and all sorts of people being arrested and now effectively being equated with terrorists such as al-Qaida, which is absolutely wrong.”

In November, the High Court will carry out a judicial review of the legality of the proscription. The *Guardian* reported of Hain, “He said if a legal challenge to the proscription was successful, it ‘would be a mercy to all concerned, including the government’”.

The worry is that the repeated weekends of arrests risk further undermining an already fragile government, and the arsenal of terrorism legislation built up by the ruling class over decades.

For the working class, this crisis sharply poses the need for a struggle not only against the Palestine Action proscription, but the Labour government. Whether it is forced to retreat on this particular measure or not, it remains a grave threat as long as it remains in office.

Such a struggle will require more than the individual acts of conscience bravely expressed in the protests in Parliament Square organised by Defend Our Juries. It means the mobilisation of the millions who support the protesters and

want to put an end to Israel’s genocide and Labour’s complicit government.

The potential for this movement is being actively blocked. Since launching his “Your Party” project last month and declaring that a new party to the left of Labour will be founded in the autumn, Corbyn has already enlisted three quarters of a million people in support. Yet he has done nothing to mobilise this mass force against the government, offering only the occasional social media posting opposing Starmer’s draconian actions.

For Starmer’s police state to be defeated a mass mobilisation in defence of democratic rights, rooted in the working class must be organised. Above all the working class must turn to the building of a new political party based on a socialist programme and opposed to the entire rotten parliamentary political set-up.

The fight must be taken up for the demands outlined in this week’s statement by the Socialist Equality Party:

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Organise meetings in your workplaces and neighbourhoods to discuss these issues.

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Propose and pass resolutions opposing the police crackdown and pledging to prepare coordinated action against it.

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Oppose the trade union bureaucracy’s blocking working class action against the Gaza genocide and attacks on democratic rights.



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