

UK Labour government oversees decision to freeze bank accounts of pro-Palestinian organisations

Margot Miller
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The pro-Palestinian UK organisation, Greater Manchester Friends of Palestine (GMFP) has been informed that the decision to freeze its bank account last year was taken as part of an investigation into the now proscribed group Palestine Action (PA). This is an outrageous attack on civil liberties, including free speech and the right to protest.

On July 10, both the GMFP and the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign had access to their bank accounts cut off by Virgin Money and Unity Trust bank respectively. Virgin Money offered no reason why this action was taken. Unity Trust said it was because Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign's website had a donation link to PA. The link was removed after PA was proscribed on July 5, but the account was not restored.

According to the *Guardian*, Labour deputy mayor of Greater Manchester, Kate Green wrote to GMFP treasurer John Nicholson saying, "I can confirm my office was told by GMP [Greater Manchester Police] that 'we are comfortable to say that this account has been frozen as a result of an investigation into Palestine Action'." The police informed Green's office they did not instigate the bank's action.

Who exactly authorised the decision remains murky, but it arises within a definite context. Contrary to the Starmer's government claim that the proscription of PA was not aimed at deterring peaceful protest, the draconian measure has been used as a dragnet to intimidate and silence widespread opposition to one of the greatest crimes this century. It is in line with the Labour government's complicity in the Gaza genocide, and its attempts to illegalise protests in support of the Palestinian people based on the big lie of conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

Both the National Crime Agency—answerable to the Home Office—and counter terrorism police declined to answer the *Guardian's* query about which agency took the decision to freeze the GMFP's bank account.

Mass arrests of demonstrators peacefully opposing the Gaza genocide escalated following the proscription of PA. Criminalization of protests has resulted in over 2,700 arrests under the same anti-terror legislation that banned PA for merely

protesting its proscription!

Preventing access to the funds of both GMFP and the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign means humanitarian aid to Gaza and the West Bank is being blocked.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Nicholson explained GMFP's account "supports people starving in Gaza, people displaced, subject to settler violence in the West bank," and is "aimed at giving funds to non-governmental organisations on the ground in Palestine."

Neither GMFP nor the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign is affiliated to Palestine Action (PA), which is a protest group that adopts acts of civil disobedience to block the arms industry in Britain from providing its lethal trade to the Israeli state to conduct its war crimes. PA was proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000, even though it repudiates acts of terrorism.

The GMFP campaigning has involved peaceful protests since the Gaza genocide began, organizing demonstrations, consumer boycotts, vigils, and protests outside banks like Barclays which trade with Israel and Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit. They have also organized bicycle rides to highlight the horrific death toll of innocent men, women and children in Gaza.

In September, in a further act of intimidation, Nicholson (71) and his partner Norma Turner (77) who is chair of GMFP had their joint savings account terminated by Yorkshire Building Society. No explanation was given as they received a cheque for the balance in the post, closing the account.

Nicholson and Turner are both signatories to the GMFP's frozen Virgin Money account. Another signatory who wishes to remain anonymous also had an account closed.

Speaking to WSWs reporters—attendees at the latest demonstration organized by GMFP in Manchester city centre on January 3—condemned the authoritarian measures meted out by the Labour government and expressed their determination to oppose it.

Emma, 37, a volunteer case worker for the homeless, said, "Their bullying tactics are not going to work, we're not going to kneel down. The law is stupid. It's a humanitarian cause [the Gaza genocide] and it's screened all over the world.

“The Labour government aren’t a Labour government anymore. To watch what’s happening in Palestine, it’s what they’re going to be doing to us here. I work with old people, and they tell me that what’s happening today is very similar to the build-up before the second world war.”

Emma was later arrested at the demonstration and bundled into a police van because of the slogans referencing Palestine Action on her placard.

Kevin, 62, a regular attendee at the Gaza protests declared, “If you think democracy is working, consider the fact that the Scottish National Party tried to move a motion for a ceasefire, but the speaker of the House [parliament] said, ‘No’.

“Capitalism is working for the few not the many. People need to see what’s happening in Venezuela. It’s an attack on everyone.”

Dr. Amer Shoaib, chairperson of the Orthocycle Foundation which recycles medical equipment to less developed countries, has recently returned from Gaza as a volunteer health worker. He gave a powerful statement, including attempts to prevent medics like himself deliver vital aid in war zones and Labour’s continuing support for the Israeli government.

He said, “I was the victim of a war crime myself because the UK medical charity, their safe house, was bombed by the Israeli army.

“Fortunately, nobody was killed. But it was very clearly an attempt to murder us so that it would put off other doctors and health care workers from going to Gaza to work. ...[The] Israeli politicians decided that this was the means by which they were going to prevent other medical charities from going into Gaza.

“And they introduced the contract, which means that a lot of charities are unable to work because they’re not going to sign up to a contract which would effectively result in them having to hand over the personal details of everyone who was working for them and put them at risk of being kidnapped or interrogated.”

“It is an incredibly difficult situation,” Dr Shoaib continued, “One that’s been exacerbated by Western governments, including the UK. I’ve seen that the UK has cancelled 33 arms export licenses. But in the three months following that declaration, they actually increased the arms exports. So, in the three months, there were \$69 million worth of arms exports for Israel. And in the previous three years, from 2020 to 2023, there were only \$49 million. The government is gaslighting us. They’re telling us one thing. They’re doing something completely different.

“They sent RAF spy planes over Gaza. Those flights have coincided with massacres. The data that’s being gathered by these RAF spy planes [are] being used in order to perpetrate massacres...

“There are people who are in prison in Britain on remand, and they are guilty of nothing apart from trying to prevent perpetration of a genocide by Elbit Systems, a company which produces drones which are deliberately targeting civilians.

“The real criminals are not those people in prison. The real criminals are not those elderly protesters or Greta Thunberg who are protesting about the lack of free speech in this country. The real criminals are politicians who are complicit with the genocide.”

The Starmer government is reprising the criminal actions of the Thatcher administration that was responsible for the deaths of 10 Irish Republican hunger strikers, including Bobby Sands, in 1981. Four young pro-Palestinian political prisoners on remand in jail, found guilty of nothing and currently on hunger strike, are in danger of starving to death.

The lurch to authoritarianism and dictatorship is part of a trend across Europe by governments mirroring those of Trump in the United States. The outlawing of anti-genocide protests presages a clampdown on anti-war protests and the austerity measures to pay for ramped up militarism.

In Germany under the Conservative-Social Democratic coalition the method of “debanking” has been adopted to deprive left-wing parties, aid organizations, publishers and critical journalists of their livelihoods, even though they have not broken any laws or been formally banned. In this way basic democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution—of free speech, freedom of the press and association—are erased without public knowledge or any justification.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle against inequality and war. This means rejecting dead-end appeals to the very criminals that support imperialist barbarism, including the Labour government abetted by the trade union bureaucracy who have not lifted a finger in opposition. The central issue is the building of an anti-war movement rooted in the unification of the international working class against capitalism in the fight for socialism.



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