

Labour's blueprint for a centralised police-state apparatus in Britain

Ioan Petrescu
30 January 2026

The British Labour government's newly published white paper, *From local to national: a new model for policing*, is being marketed as a long-overdue "modernisation" that will deliver "better policing for local communities."

In reality, the document outlines a qualitative restructuring of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, aimed at centralising command, expanding surveillance, and enhancing the capacity to suppress social and political opposition. Far from a technocratic reform, it constitutes a strategic preparation for intensified state repression against an emerging movement of the working class.

Announced by Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, the white paper is presented as the biggest transformation of policing "in nearly 200 years." It advances familiar justifications—fragmented structures, inefficiency, inconsistent standards, and the challenge of "digitally enabled" crime.

But the timing and content of these reforms can only be understood in the context of the global crisis of capitalism, marked by economic decline, deepening social inequality, escalating imperialist conflict, and a resurgence of working-class struggle internationally. The ruling class confronts growing hostility, to worsening social conditions, Britain's support for Israel's genocide in Gaza and the costs of militarisation.

The centrepiece of the reforms is the creation of a National Police Service (NPS). This new force would absorb the National Crime Agency, Counter Terrorism Policing, and Regional Organised Crime Units, while assuming national "strategic leadership" and "standard setting." The white paper makes explicit that its purpose is to replace the current "weak" policing structure—where authority is dispersed among multiple local forces—with a centralised command capable of enforcing the priorities of the government across the country.

The government plans to reduce the current 43-force structure in England and Wales, moving toward fewer, larger regional forces following an independent review, while reorganising day-to-day policing into "Local Policing Areas" beneath these larger entities. Beneath the language of "efficiency" and "avoiding duplication," the restructuring is designed to facilitate rapid, large-scale deployments against strikes, protests, and social unrest.

The reforms strengthen direct Home Office control. The Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) would gain powers to issue directions to police forces with the Home Secretary's approval. This would be reinforced by a new Home Office Police Performance Improvement Unit and a tiered performance framework institutionalising permanent monitoring and discipline of forces against centrally determined targets.

The government further proposes restoring the home secretary's authority to remove chief constables on "performance grounds," explicitly framing this as a mechanism to ensure conformity with national priorities. This would grant Mahmood, and any future home secretary, the power to rapidly remove any chief constable who does not adhere to the government's political line.

The last change is particularly notable, coming in the wake of the forced retirement of West Midlands Chief Constable Craig Guildford after he took the decision to ban fans of Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv football club from attending a Europa League football fixture in Birmingham. This followed violent rampages by supporters of the club—notoriously close to the Israel Defence Forces—in Amsterdam and other cities.

The white paper's technological programme is equally revealing. It commits more than £140 million over three years for "Police.AI" (a new National Centre for AI in Policing), the rollout of 40 additional Live Facial Recognition vans, and a bespoke legal framework to normalise facial recognition nationwide. This is coupled

with plans to create a single national database for policing information.

British police forces are already among the most aggressive adopters of facial recognition technology internationally, deploying it through secretive watchlists and without meaningful parliamentary oversight.

Millions of individuals have been scanned. A joint investigation by the *Guardian* and Liberty Investigates—the investigative journalism unit of the civil rights organisation Liberty—found that police in England and Wales scanned nearly 4.7 million faces using live facial recognition cameras in the year leading up to May 2025, more than double the figure recorded in 2023.

Liberty described the expansion of facial recognition as “one of the most significant threats to civil liberties in the history of British policing.” The white paper institutionalises this infrastructure, transforming extraordinary surveillance measures into a permanent feature of everyday policing.

While the government insists it lacks the resources to fund housing, education, or healthcare, it finds billions to construct a high-tech policing architecture capable of monitoring entire populations in real time.

The authoritarian character of Labour’s agenda is already being demonstrated in practice. In July 2025, the government passed a proscription order under the Terrorism Act banning Palestine Action, making “support” for the group—through slogans, placards, and symbols—criminally punishable. Since the ban came into effect, arrests of people for declaring their support for the direct action group have reached almost 3,000.

The recent hunger strikes by imprisoned Palestine Action-affiliated defendants—charged over actions including daubing military aircraft with red paint at the Brize Norton Royal Air Force base—has underscored the punitive and political character of the prosecutions. Activists face months, and in some cases years, on remand before trial.

The construction of a National Police Service, the strengthening of Home Office intervention, and the expansion of AI-driven policing constitute an open declaration that the state intends to treat mass opposition by workers, above all anti-war opposition, as a “national security” threat.

The criminalisation of protest and the expansion of the state apparatus expose the character of Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party as a tried and tested instrument of the capitalist state. Amid growing doubts within sections of the bourgeoisie over the political stability of the Starmer

government, the police “reforms” signal that Labour is prepared to deploy the full weight of the state against social opposition.

By championing these measures, Mahmood is also positioning herself within intensifying Labour Party factional struggles.

Britain’s trajectory is not unique. In the United States, the Trump administration has escalated the operations of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) gestapo squads against immigrants and political opponents, mobilising quasi-military forces in major cities.

In Germany, the government is expanding domestic intelligence resources and digital surveillance capabilities, including facial recognition and automated data analysis.

In Australia, the Labor government has exploited the Bondi Beach tragedy to impose sweeping restrictions on public assemblies and extend police powers over demonstrations.

In Canada, the Liberal government has introduced legislation granting law enforcement unprecedented powers to spy on individuals without warrants.

These developments represent the necessary preparations for class conflict as capitalist ruling elites confront intensifying struggles by workers over jobs, wages, austerity, collapsing public services, and imperialist war. A national command structure and a high-tech surveillance infrastructure is being constructed to confront the inevitable eruption of social opposition.

The defence of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to any faction of the political establishment. It requires the independent mobilisation of the working class, uniting opposition to war, austerity and repression in a conscious struggle against capitalism itself—the root cause of the authoritarian turn accelerating in Britain and internationally.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact