

Conviction of Palestine Action activists escalates Labour's historic assault on democratic rights

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The conviction of five Palestine Action activists at Woolwich Crown Court on May 5 marks a major escalation in the Labour government's criminalisation of opposition to the genocide in Gaza, and the right to protest.

Charlotte Head, Leona Kamio, Fatima Rajwani and Samuel Corner were convicted of criminal damage. Jordan Devlin was convicted of violent disorder. Zoe Rogers was acquitted of all charges. Corner was also convicted of grievous bodily harm, but was cleared of grievous bodily harm with intent.

The verdicts follow a retrial and relate to a break-in at Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems UK's Filton site near Bristol in August 2024.

Immediately following the verdicts, Mr Justice Johnson ordered that Corner, Head, Kamio and Rajwani be remanded in custody pending sentencing, provisionally scheduled for June 12. They face the prospect of heavy sentences, as their case has been flagged by the Crown Prosecution Service and the police as terrorism related.

The convictions are a continuation of the activists' punishment at the hands of the British state, with their imprisonment now stretching back nearly two years since their arrest in August 2024, barely four weeks after the election of the Starmer Labour government.

The case has been central to the efforts of the Labour government, courts, police and media to construct the narrative that Palestine Action is a "terrorist" organisation and that opposition to Israel's mass slaughter in Gaza be equated with "antisemitism" and hatred of Jews.

Initially, 24 people were charged over the Filton action, which saw activists enter the factory and damage equipment linked to weapons production for the Israeli state, including drones used to murder civilians. The six defendants in the first trial—Head, Kamio, Rajwani, Rogers, Devlin and Corner—were subjected to extraordinarily punitive treatment by the British state.

Held on remand under harsh conditions, denied basic rights routinely granted to defendants awaiting trial, and repeatedly refused bail, they had already spent more than 500 days imprisoned without conviction by the time the first trial concluded earlier this year.

The first trial at Woolwich Crown Court dealt a substantial political blow to both the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Labour government.

On February 18, a jury in that trial acquitted all six defendants of aggravated burglary, the most serious charge against them and one carrying the possibility of life imprisonment. The acquittals shattered attempts by the prosecution to portray the defendants as violent

extremists and terrorists.

However, the jury failed to reach verdicts on charges of criminal damage and violent disorder. Under British law, prosecutors may seek a retrial where jurors cannot agree on a verdict.

The CPS moved rapidly to pursue a second trial. During the retrial in April and May 2026, prosecutors dropped violent disorder charges against three defendants but continued to pursue criminal damage allegations against all six, alongside the grievous bodily harm charge against Corner.

The retrial was politically indispensable for the Labour government.

In July 2025, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper formally proscribed Palestine Action under terrorism legislation, claiming the organisation met the statutory definition of terrorism. Cooper cited Elbit as an example of why PA's proscription was necessary, telling MPs in June 2025, "In several attacks, Palestine Action has committed acts of serious damage to property with the aim of progressing its political cause and influencing the Government."

The ongoing Filton prosecution was repeatedly invoked by the media to justify the ban.

Since the proscription, more than 3,300 people have been arrested under terrorism legislation for expressing support for Palestine Action.

The acquittals at the first Filton trial represented a second major setback for the government's efforts to criminalise opposition to the Gaza genocide. On February 13, the High Court ruled that the proscription of Palestine Action was unlawful and that it represented a disproportionate attack on democratic rights, including freedom of speech and assembly. Yet mass arrests have continued with the Starmer government doubling down on the banning order in the face of mounting public opposition.

Against this backdrop, convictions in the retrial became essential to the state's efforts to legitimise the branding of PA activists as "terrorists" and to intensify the wider crackdown on the right to protest and free speech.

Both trials have exposed the extraordinary measures the British state has employed to secure convictions.

Jurors were repeatedly instructed by Judge Johnson that in reaching a verdict, they must not consider the genocide in Gaza, Israel's crimes against the Palestinian people or the defendants' political motivations. Jurors were also denied any knowledge of the severe sentences the defendants faced if convicted.

The judge ruled before the first trial that conscience and sincerely held political belief could not constitute a "lawful excuse" or

mitigation for the defendants' actions. The jury could only be guided by the evidence presented, which was significantly narrowed because of Johnson's own guidance.

The defendants were thereby prevented from fully explaining why they had targeted a company producing weapons components used by the Israeli military.

The attack on the right to a fair trial reached astounding levels during the closing phase of both trials.

At the conclusion of the retrial, Charlotte Head and four co-defendants felt compelled to dismiss their barristers shortly before closing speeches and addressed the jury themselves. Head explained, "after some decisions made by the court, I no longer feel like they are permitted to represent me in a way that does us all justice."

She continued, evoking powerfully the history of democratic legal procedures being trampled by the British courts: "I was unsurprised to learn that, in 1898, when the first person was allowed to answer the charges they faced from the witness box and testify to their own defence, many people, including prosecutors and judges, were worried about what would happen. Not because they feared that the defendants would lie but because they feared the jury sympathising more with normal people than the elites of the legal profession."

Addressing her actions in the Elbit factory, Head asked of evidence not heard by the jury: "Why is there no precise inventory of what was damaged or destroyed? You might feel it's because they don't want to highlight the weapons they're making on British soil or that the narrative spun by the prosecution is incorrect. You might consider the contrast between Elbit Systems on one hand and me and my co-defendants on the other and wonder which one has been more open, honest and human with you."

Appealing to her peers she concluded, "So now I ask you, the jury, to remember the power you hold. Your fundamental right as jurors to decide the facts has been celebrated in the UK for centuries."

The left-wing Jewish Voice for Liberation has compiled a transcript of the speeches given before the court by the defendants.

Yet further outrages followed. After the guilty verdicts, Rajiv Menon KC was re-engaged to represent Head and another defendant in an unsuccessful application for bail.

Only after final verdicts, as reporting restrictions were lifted, could it be revealed that Menon himself was the target of extraordinary judicial measures. Menon is one of the most prominent human rights barristers, having worked on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the Hillsborough inquests, the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the Undercover Policing Inquiry.

Following the end of the February trial, Menon was threatened with contempt proceedings by Judge Johnson over his closing speech to the jury.

During his closing address, Menon stated on six occasions that the trial judge could not direct the jury to convict the defendants. Menon referred to Bushell's Case of 1670, the historic ruling establishing the independence of juries from state coercion. He read the inscription displayed at the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales) in London commemorating the case, which "established the right of juries to give their verdict according to their convictions."

In response, Johnson accused Menon of defying court orders which had prohibited any reference to the jury's historic right to acquit according to conscience. He declared, "The effect of Mr Menon's speech was to invite the jury to disregard my directions that they should put views of the Middle East and the war in Gaza, and emotion, to one side."

The contempt proceedings against a senior KC for remarks defending the jury's independence are unprecedented in British legal history.

Michael Mansfield KC, a prominent human rights barrister, who has worked with Menon on several high-profile cases, stated: "I've been at the bar for over 50 years. I'm extremely concerned about the issues that are at the centre of this initiative, which has never been done before as far as I'm aware, particularly the chilling effect upon the critical concept of a fiercely independent bar, fearless in its pursuit of justice on behalf of those it represents."

The evisceration of centuries old legal and democratic rights signified by Menon's targeting was underscored outside the court during the retrial when police arrested nine people under the Public Order Act for holding signs reading: "Jurors have an absolute right to acquit according to their conscience" and "Jurors deserve to hear the whole truth."

The retrial unfolded amid a renewed campaign by the government, police and media demanding intensified measures against what they falsely portray as an epidemic of antisemitism and indifference to the fate of British Jews.

This hysteria was cynically inflamed following the stabbing of two Jewish men in Golders Green, north London, by Essa Suleiman, a British national, whom police later revealed had severe mental health problems.

Ignored in the mass media coverage was the fact that Suleiman had allegedly attacked another man earlier the same day—Ishmail Hussein, a Muslim man, who suffered knife injuries following an altercation with Suleiman.

The methods employed in the Filton case are establishing sinister precedents for the suppression of all political opposition by equating civil disobedience and protest with terrorism. That the courts have collaborated so openly in restricting political defences, curbing jury independence, and criminalising appeals to conscience demonstrates the advanced decay of democratic rights in Britain.

Workers and youth must oppose this onslaught on democratic rights and demand the immediate release of all Palestine protesters and the de-proscription of Palestine Action.



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