



DEFEND THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

After a year of misery, more Covid cuts are coming. This threatens us all - maybe cuts to a local A&E, more cuts to street-lighting, bus routes disappearing - and greater destitution.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill means the more effective your protest, the more you face the threat of fines or even jail. The Tories plan to build on their Covid powers to, for example, fine a nurse £10,000 for organising a protest.

It's no coincidence that this bill is before Parliament just as workers and young people are organising to fight the derisory NHS pay offer, the disgusting 'fire

and rehire' practices rolling out across workplaces, and for students' fee and rent refunds.

There is a huge Covid spending bill - and the Tories are preparing to make us pay it with attacks on our services, jobs, and pay.

The Tory government knows that working-class people will not accept the misery they are offering. In order to try and prevent the inevitable mass protests and strikes, they are trying to beef up the repressive powers of the police. It won't work!

Continued overleaf

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The mass defiance of the ban on the Sarah Everard vigil indicates the resistance the government will face. It also turned a spotlight on the Bill: until then Keir Starmer's Labour planned to abstain!

How can you consider abstaining on an attempt to silence the working class? When you're on the side of the big business capitalist class.

Working-class people can only rely on our own strength to defend our democratic rights and ability to fight austerity - the right to protest, organise, march and strike. The government's retreat on maintaining the ban on protests in the Covid legislation indicates how they can be pushed back.

Now is the time to press ahead!

The trade union leaders must take the lead. Coordinate our protests, starting with NHS workers, linking up with those facing attacks across the public sector, students, and young workers looking down the barrel of unemployment. Socialist Party members are standing in trade union elections to raise this fighting approach that's necessary.

Starmer's rotten role makes clear we also need our own political voice. By campaigning for and standing no-cuts candidates in the 6 May elections, as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, the Socialist Party is fighting to help bring a new mass workers' party into being.

The government factsheet on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill explains that it will "strengthen police powers to tackle non-violent protests that have a significant disruptive effect on the public or on access to Parliament."

On 17 March, workers involved in a peaceful picket at SAICA Packaging's Edinburgh site were dispersed by Police

Scotland after threats of fines and further 'punishment' for anyone orchestrating the dispute.

Strikes and occupations by workers fighting austerity and low pay are effective because they disrupt the bosses and their attacks.

Police Bill threats

Under this proposed legislation we face a fine of £2,500 for not following police restrictions over how we conduct our protests.

Effective protest that is considered a "public nuisance", will now be a statutory offence rather than a common law offence. Would this include, for example, a workers' factory occupation against closure and the loss of jobs?

The police will have the power to assume protesters have knowledge of conditions set on a protest, making it easier to convict for 'breaches' of their undemocratic restrictions.

The Home Secretary will have the power, through secondary legislation, to define "serious disruption to the activities of an organisation". This sounds like it's aimed at, for example, those strikers in Edinburgh.

Over the weekend of 20 and 21 March thousands across the country marched to say 'Kill the Bill'. One of the biggest protests was in Bristol, where thousands peacefully assembled. Later in the evening, a small number of the protesters were involved in clashes with police which is being used by Home Secretary Priti Patel to make the case for her repressive legislation.

We do not condone rioting, but video footage of the demonstration shows police violently pushing, shoving and batoning peaceful protesters well before protesters responded. The possibility of deliberate

provocation is obvious.

Police claims that officers suffered broken bones in the incident have since been retracted.

Yet Bristol's Labour mayor limited himself to condemning the rioters, without raising any demands for the police to be held to account for their actions. He claims to oppose the bill, but why didn't he use his position as mayor to mobilise the labour movement to build for the protest, and also to organise democratically accountable stewarding?

Police provocation is not a new risk to the labour movement and should be anticipated as much as the legal attacks on democratic rights. While these new police powers, like previous ones, won't prevent collective working-class action, if passed they aim to undermine it - in big business's interests.

As part of the preparations for the struggle against Covid austerity, the trade union movement should be coordinating protests against this bill, and for democratic community control of the police.

No law will prevent protest

However, even if the bill passes, the Tories are fooling themselves if they think unjust laws can prevent a tsunami of protest.

This month is the 30th anniversary of the announcement of the removal of the unjust poll tax law from the statute books by an 18-million strong mass movement of organised civil disobedience, led by the Socialist Party, then called Militant.

That movement forced the resignation of the 'Iron Lady' - Maggie Thatcher, but it will be put into the shade by the storms ahead for Johnson.

If you agree with what we're saying, now is the time to get in touch to join!

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