



UK: Kill the Bill!

KD Tait , Red Flag Wed, 28/04/2021 - 10:17

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As the second covid lockdown draws to a close, social tensions are rising. Despite the government's large majority, won thanks to right wing Labour MPs sabotaging the 2019 election campaign, Boris Johnson and his cabinet of Brexit extremists are beset on all fronts.

Anticipating the explosion of anger over 150,000 deaths, pay cuts and mass unemployment when furlough ends, and spiralling protests against institutional racism and sexism, the government has proposed a new law which would massively restrict the right to protest.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will place limits on protests and public assembly ? effectively imposing a permanent state of emergency. Police will have powers to ban public gatherings and protests simply by declaring them a ?public nuisance?. Importantly, this vague definition allows those targeted by protests, such as business, banks and landlords, to oblige police to shut down protests against them. Organisers will be criminalised; refusal to comply with police instructions could result in fines of up to £2,500. Absurdly, defacing monuments like those of Bristol slaver Edward Colston or the genocidal imperialist Winston Churchill will become punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

The Tories have used the lockdown as a pretext to ban demonstrations, arrest hundreds, and issue fines totalling tens of thousands of pounds. Home secretary Priti Patel was furious at the police failure to clear Extinction Rebellion blockades and denounced peaceful Black Lives Matter protests last summer as ?dreadful?. After Metropolitan Police officers attacked a peaceful vigil in memory of Sarah Everard, who was murdered by a serving police officer, anger erupted across the country, with large demonstrations coalescing into a new coalition to #KillTheBill which unites black activists, feminists, environmentalists, socialists and trade unionists.

Spirited demonstrations and defence of the movement against police repression from London to Bristol over several weeks forced the government to delay the Bill until September. On 1 May, marked by the working class around the world as International Workers' Day, the Kill The Bill movement will step up the pressure by mobilising all those with an interest in fighting back in a nationwide day of action.

The Tories obviously have an eye to growing trade union discontent over pay deals for public sector workers that amount to a real-terms pay cut, and the increasing use of the outrageous ?fire and rehire? schemes by private employers to bully workers into accepting lower pay and worse conditions.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the Labour Party and most trade union bureaucrats have remained silent on this attack, which will tighten the noose around effective industrial action, on top of what are already the most restrictive anti-trade union laws in Europe. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, a former Director of Public Prosecutions, first backed the government proposals before being forced to side with protesters after the violence meted out to attendees of the Sarah Everard Vigil. Even then, he and his shadow cabinet refused to call for the resignation of Met police chief Cressida Dick and Priti Patel who ordered the attack.

There is no excuse for this cowardice. In France, a spate of similar laws targeting Muslims and activists has been met by weeks of fierce resistance in the streets, even during the lockdown. Strikes, protests and blockades by school students, trade unionists and workers have popularised opposition among French workers. In both France and the UK, repressive laws are designed to make it easier for the government and the big employers it represents to make the

working class and youth pay for the cost of the pandemic with our jobs, wages, living conditions and futures.

Kill the Bill can be a powerful movement of movements: separate fingers that together make a fist. The militant rank and file of the labour and trade union movement need to get involved in a big way. Together with young people from the schools and the colleges, with young workers from the gig economy, we can revive the militant anticapitalism last seen in the demonstrations against the rise in tuition fees in 2010-11 and the Occupy movement in 2012, and before that in the anti-Poll Tax movement of the early 1990s, the movement against the Criminal Justice Bill, and the social forums and summit sieges between 1999 and 2005.

The spontaneity of the early mobilisations is understandable, covid restrictions and police harassment of organisers made this necessary. But, as the lockdown is relaxed, and in order to develop a plan for escalation that draws the working class into developing clear demands and a strategy for victory, spontaneity needs to evolve into mass democratic discussion and decision making.

The diverse range of organisations and campaigns represented in the Kill the Bill coalition demonstrates the potential for the movement to open the road to a wider working class offensive against the government, employers and landlords: an organised movement against unemployment, strike action for decent pay, unionisation of the super exploited gig economy, warehouse and sweatshop workers.

We need to root the campaign in the working class and youth by holding regular mass people's assemblies to debate the way forward and vote on decisions. Committees of action, formed of delegates from trade unions, workplaces, campaigns and organisations can democratically coordinate the struggle and bypass the sabotage or indifference of the Labour and trade union bureaucrats. Linked to these fighting bodies of working class self-organisation is the need for organised, disciplined self-defence of our movement and communities under democratic control, through demonstration stewards organisation and picket-line defence groups.

If we cannot defeat the Bill in parliament, we must make it unworkable on the streets. Our strategy aims not only at stopping the Bill but rebuilding the basic elements of working class organisation and power, fighting bodies of mass action which are the precondition for a successful struggle to force the repeal of all reactionary and racist laws and with them deal a crushing blow to the bosses and their politicians.

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