

Criminalisation of the Working Class

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Are we criminals ? Are you ? The rhetoric of the ruling class, their servants and apologists certainly suggests we *are* criminals and that we are to blame for everything wrong in the world. This is a song the capitalists never get tired of singing: there's something wrong with the working class !

Criminalisation of the working class is a set of policies applied more or less severely depending on the rough balance of power between the twin poles of bourgeois democracy: conservative, reactionary, statist on the one-hand, do-gooding, moralising, populist on the other. It is something that is always with us. It is also a future history becoming all too horribly real – *why* ?

'Law and Order' usually plays a big part in elections but didn't in May – *why not* ? The reason is that Labour and the Tories agree on both the causes of criminality and its 'cure' – the inadequacy of the working class as parents and draconian assaults on individual 'criminals' publicly celebrated as a means to cow and intimidate the rest of the sheep. Criminality is seen as a working class disease. Its cause, basically poor and uneducated people, must be caught and shot with the 'magic bullet' of prison and punitive sentencing or isolated by public humiliation, electronic tagging, injunctions and permanent branding, for instance through publicly-available registers of sex-offenders which invite vigilantism and mob justice.

Campaign

The process of criminalisation is not new. When we read about the 'sturdy beggars' of Elizabethan times, debtors prisons or the pariah status of the 'undeserving poor' we hear echoes of a long campaign to maximise the power of the ruling class by dividing and stigmatising those who are ruled.

We are criminalised in three main ways. Firstly, the state invents a vast range of offences, usually based on the desire to protect property and control working class collective action and violence. It defines these as 'criminal', unacceptable in a 'civilised' society. In contrast, upper class offences like fraud, tax evasion or corruption are treated as individual falls from grace, exceptions to the rule deserving lenient treatment and sympathy. Working class 'crime' such as shoplifting or benefit fraud was seen this way in the 60s and 70s but the right-wing dominance of politics has swept belief in the idea of the working class as victims of an unequal society away; crime has become simply a symptom of wholesale working class degeneracy. Sections of the populace who have never committed a crime can now be treated as if they had. One of the sickest outcomes of such beliefs was the forced sterilisation and incarceration of 3000 children accused of being 'mentally defective', 'sexually immoral' or 'incapable of intelligent parenthood' (does this ring any bells ?) in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s. Tory politicians are proposing that children be tried in adult courts. Michael Howard proposed that the parents of children who have not committed crimes but were merely *in danger* of committing crimes should be fined or suffer curfews enforced by electronic tagging if they fail or are unable to obey 'parental control orders'.

Stigmatised

Secondly, the working class is stigmatised as criminal or potentially criminal on the basis of a few sensationalised cases. This allows the State to concoct laws which bear down most on the

working class and to justify a presumption of guilt by police and courts which is parroted by the media and picked up by reactionary groups who then threaten violence, demand the 'criminal' be evicted from their homes or hurl abuse and worse. This treatment is not now reserved for the 'worst' criminals (like sex offenders) but increasingly directed at anyone who fails to adhere to the new right-wing code of conduct (for instance parents who cannot 'control' their children in East Sussex or on the Meadowell Estate). Being black, a lone parent, living on a ghetto estate, being young or unemployed, all are being portrayed as criminals who haven't been caught or parents of a new generation of the lawless. Actions and conditions previously seen as social problems are being criminalised. Benefit fraud and immigration officials are joining police stop-checks ostensibly to catch rogue lorry drivers or unsafe vehicles. They treat everyone like criminals and actively gather information on other people whose names are then run through computers. One-third of Britain receives some form of means-tested benefit and all are potential criminals in the eyes of the State. If you are treated like a criminal it is because the State thinks you are a criminal. This allows people who have committed no crime to be penned up in detention centres or manacled while on remand, even if they are dying, as happened in one recent case. These are merely the worst aspects of the drive to socially control behaviour and criminalise those who resist – parent-school contracts, compulsory parenting classes for dysfunctional families, probationary tenancies in council housing, curfews to keep young people indoors. In America law enforcement is increasingly resorting to 'shaming sentences' where the guilty must take out newspaper ads or erect signs outside their houses publicly proclaiming their crime.

Reactionary

Thirdly, any demand for change or resistance to this political program is itself criminalised through reactionary laws. As the area of freedom gets smaller we are increasingly criminalised. 18th Century rationalists campaigned for a universal code of justice which abstractly judged all actions. What they failed to realise was that the State will always develop codes of justice that serve *its* interests and that in a parliamentary dictatorship like Britain all actions will be legalised or criminalised at the whim of the ruling class. Things like the Criminal Justice Act and the massive expansion of the 'Surveillance Society' threaten to make guilt by accusation and association the norm. Demonstrations are photographed, city centres filmed, unmarked police vans with infra-red cameras prowl night-time streets, benefit hotlines receive thousands of malicious, unsubstantiated accusations every day. We are increasingly patrolled and controlled, seen as dangerous or potential criminals. Against this threat (a threat wholly concocted by the ruling class to justify a police state), any repressive measure is justified.

The election of a Labour Government is unlikely to slow this process and may even accelerate it. The massive majority was won by votes from Middle England, people who are basically conservative, well-off, in secure jobs who simply got tired of the Tories and voted instead for a different 'Tory' party – Labour. MPs representing the clean streets and shopping centres of the south are likely to parrot the prejudices of their constituents, not fight for social justice.

Tide

In such a situation, with a right-wing political tide running so strongly, it is difficult to see what can be done. Around the world, though, there are examples of people successfully challenging injustice. The landless peasants of the Sem Terra movement in Brazil are occupying unused land and forcing the Government to award it to them. French workers have forced the government to retreat on Thatcherite austerity policies. South Korean workers paralysed the country protesting against attacks on labour rights.

All these campaigns have a number of things in common. Firstly, they successfully universalise their action so that all sections of the working class can understand and agree with what they are fighting for. Secondly, they all involve determined mass action which ignores rules and laws designed to curb protest. Thirdly there are very high levels of solidarity inside the campaigns and a willingness to accept the support of and draw into the struggle other groups — this only comes about by extensive political education, grass-roots control and consensus not command politics. If we are to successfully challenge the process of criminalisation, we must do the same. We must develop a culture of resistance which understands that the State's attacks may appear to be aimed at particular groups but are in fact part of a broader process of wholesale criminalisation, isolation and control. Work on estates, determined campaigns against attacks on the working class, taking our ideas into new arenas, strengthening and renewing the belief in mass action — these are our urgent tasks.

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