

New measures against football hooligans undermine civil liberties in Britain

By Julie Hyland
29 August 2000

Controversial measures banning suspected football hooligans from travelling abroad came into force in Britain on Monday.

The Football (Disorder) Act 2000 undermines civil liberties. In what has been described as a "fundamental shift of power in this country", the legislation overturns the presumption of innocence and grants police the right to search, arrest and impose a travel ban on anyone they suspect to be potential football hooligans.

The legislation also introduces the mandatory surrender of passports and the setting up of special courts sited near to ports and main railway stations to enable the speedy endorsement of travel bans. A five-day "control period" will be declared in the run up to major football matches abroad, during which a banning order or notice to serve one can be imposed at any time. Suspected hooligans, including those with no previous convictions, can be banned from attending overseas matches for up to 10 years.

Home Secretary Jack Straw said that the legislation demonstrated his government's determination to "get rid once and for all of the obnoxious taint of football hooliganism".

The Football (Disorder) Act was rushed through Parliament in July, after violent clashes involving England fans at the Euro 2000 football tournament. In Belgium, a total of 824 fans, mostly English, were detained by the authorities over a weekend fixture and 200 England fans were expelled from the country.

The Euro 2000 incidents came after repeated clashes between English and Turkish fans, following the killing of two Leeds United supporters by Turkish Galatasary supporters earlier in the year.

News broadcasts of drunken English fans, shouting racist slogans and fighting opposing supporters during Euro 2000, caused grave embarrassment to the Blair

government and football authorities. The incidents came just as England was preparing to place its bid to host the World Cup finals in 2006 before FIFA's executive committee—the world body governing football. Winning the host bid can be worth billions of pounds in sponsorship deals and tourism.

With Europe's governing body, UEFA, condemning English fans as a "disgrace" and threatening to throw the England team out of Euro 2000, the football authorities and the police demanded tougher laws to crack down on hooliganism. Football Association chief executive Adam Crozier said new laws "must be considered just the start of a huge drive to stop these people disgracing not just the game of football but the whole nation."

Although legislation already exists in the Football Spectators Act 1990 to prevent certain individuals from attending football matches, the Blair government hurriedly drew up more far reaching legislation. The new Bill was specifically designed to accommodate criticisms that existing laws only enabled a ban on those with previous convictions. Prior to Euro 2000, 500 English fans had been prevented from travelling abroad. However, none of those arrested and expelled in Belgium had previous convictions and so could not have been prevented from leaving the country under existing legislation.

This was held to be in poor contrast with the actions of the German authorities in preventing suspected hooligans from travelling to Belgium prior to Euro 2000. German police had staged hundreds of dawn raids on homes before the tournament, seizing passports and banning 3,000 potential troublemakers from leaving the country.

Keen to placate the football authorities and sponsors, and prove it could be just as tough as Germany—a rival

bidder and eventual winner to host World Cup 2006—the Blair government pressed the new Act through parliament in record time.

The Bill will do nothing to prevent the type of drunken, xenophobic behaviour so openly displayed by English and other international supporters in Euro 2000. Ultimately this is rooted in the political climate in many countries, in which the official parties strive to outdo each other with their anti-foreigner sentiment and nationalism. Football tournaments, particularly at an international level, deliberately endorse such prejudices with their gladiatorial-style confrontations between countries for glory or defeat. The media plays a largely negative role by portraying each match as a virtual mini-war.

To silence criticisms of its impact on civil liberties, the government agreed to include a "sunset clause" reducing the lifetime of the bill to two years. However there are numerous examples where legislation "temporarily" curtailing democratic rights on emergency grounds has been made permanent. The most notable of these is the Prevention of Terrorism Act, introduced ostensibly to deal with the situation in Northern Ireland during the 1970s. This legislation was regularly renewed by parliament until the Blair government made its provisions permanent last year.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>