

Britain: Socialist Equality Party condemns arrest of Tommy Sheridan on perjury charges

By by Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The Socialist Equality Party condemns the arrest and perjury charges levelled against Tommy Sheridan, convenor of the Solidarity-Scotland's Socialist Movement.

Sheridan, a former Member for the Scottish Parliament (MSP) for the Scottish Socialist Party, from which his organisation split last year, was arrested on Sunday December 16 in Edinburgh by plain-clothes officers just moments after he had finished his regular weekly show, on Talk107 radio station.

After six hours of questioning, he was charged with perjury relating to his successful libel action against Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* in July 2006. In a major upset, Sheridan was awarded a record £200,000 in damages after the jury found the *News of the World* had libelled him as a swinger, who took part in orgies, snorted cocaine and cheated on his wife.

According to reports, charges could also follow against family and comrades of Sheridan, including his wife Gail and his father-in-law, who testified on his behalf during the trial. On Sunday, Gail Sheridan was cautioned as some nine police officers searched the family home in Glasgow. Several bags and a computer were reportedly seized.

Speaking after his arrest, Sheridan said, "It's nine days before Christmas. My house has been ransacked, my wife has been traumatised, and my 2½-year-old child has been reduced to tears by the presence of nine police officers."

He told the *Herald*, "Gail can't believe the level of police activity. They spent seven hours in our home."

Sheridan denounced the charges as a "political witch-hunt", stating that, "I believe this whole farcical inquiry, which has usurped an incredible amount of public resources, has been orchestrated and influenced by the powerful reach of the Murdoch empire and I

believe that I am the victim of a witch-hunt from the Murdoch empire."

"I will prove my innocence in the fullness of time."

In a statement, Sheridan's lawyer, Aamer Anwar, said, "Mr Sheridan maintains his innocence and condemns the excessive action of Lothian and Borders Police today." Anwar, a prominent human rights lawyer, himself faces charges of contempt of court pertaining to a statement he read outside court after the conviction of his client, Mohammed Atif Siddique, on anti-terror laws.

Notwithstanding our significant political differences with Sheridan, there is no doubt that the *News of the World's* salacious series of articles alleging his infidelities were politically motivated. At a time of deepening hostility to the Labour government under Tony Blair and its illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, the objective was to discredit Sheridan, who was most publicly associated with the populist brand of "left" Scottish nationalism that had led to six SSP members being elected to the Scottish parliament, along with two local councillors.

With elections to the Scottish parliament due in 2007, in which Labour was expected to suffer further heavy losses, the SSP could have anticipated winning a greater numbers of seats. Sheridan split from the SSP and formed Solidarity because its leadership opposed his decision to pursue legal action against the *News of the World*. Eleven leading SSP members took the stand during the libel action to testify against Sheridan and support Murdoch's claims. In the 2007 elections, both the SSP and Solidarity lost all their seats in the Scottish parliament. The major beneficiary of Labour's losses was the Scottish National Party, which has subsequently formed a minority administration.

The trial's end saw the judge warn that a criminal

investigation into perjury was “inevitable”, given that members of the SSP executive had taken to the stand to denounce Sheridan and present “contradictory evidence” to the four former leading members and other witnesses who defended him. Punishment for perjury is up to ten years imprisonment.

In the aftermath of Sheridan’s arrest, Solidarity issued a statement declaring its “100 percent” support for its convenor, charging that he “has been the victim of a colossal vendetta by the Rupert Murdoch media empire.”

In a separate statement, “Who is pulling the strings?” Solidarity allege that following Sheridan’s successful libel case, “In a meeting with News International executives following the verdict, Mr. Murdoch apparently declared that no matter what it cost he wanted that ‘commie bastard’ brought down.”

They draw attention to the role played in the jury’s verdict of hostility to *News of the World*, citing Iain McWhirter, writing in the *Sunday Herald*, stating, “It was a rebuke to an industry that preys on human misery and disclosure; that uses chequebook journalism, spin, sensation, distortion. This has been a long time coming.”

The Solidarity statement charged that the *News of the World* campaign “has been aided and abetted by the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), many of whom gave evidence on behalf of the NotW during the original trial. News International, through the NotW and the *Sun* in Scotland, provided a platform for these prominent SSP members to denounce Sheridan and demand a police investigation in the immediate aftermath, accusing their former Party Convenor of committing perjury. They demanded that he resign as an MSP in advance of the Scottish elections earlier this year, and even went so far as to organise the sale of a videotape, taken by an SSP member, to the NotW in return for a reported £20,000.”

Following news of Sheridan’s arrest, the SSP has issued a terse three line statement, in which it “notes the arrest today of former member Tommy Sheridan” before stating that it “is far more interested in campaigning to improve the lives of working people in Scotland, to end the hated council tax, promote public ownership of our public services, rid this country of nuclear weapons, end the war in Iraq, achieve independence for Scotland and support workers

involved in industrial action to defend their jobs, pay and conditions.”

Back in May, the SSP rump had already made plain that it considered legal action against Sheridan to be the means of its own political salvation. In the wake of its disastrous election results, SSP leader Alan McCombes wrote that the “stark facts” are that “Like Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken, two top Tory politicians who served lengthy jail sentences for their actions, Tommy Sheridan took out a libel action based on a fraud: at least some of the material published in the trashy tabloid *News of the World* was substantially true.”

With the “removal of Tommy Sheridan from Holyrood, the Solidarity bubble will burst,” he continued, “allowing Scottish socialism to be rebuilt under the clean banner of the SSP.”

The Solidarity statement notes that after Sheridan’s libel victory, “a slow drip of news stories regarding the progress of the perjury investigation has appeared on an almost weekly basis in the pages of the *Sunday Herald*.” These were authored by political editor Paul Hutcheon. “Hutcheon’s former colleague, Tom Gordon, reported on the original court case for the *Sunday Herald*’s sister paper, the *Herald*,” the statement continues, adding that “after the trial, Tom Gordon left the *Herald* and now writes for the *Sunday Times*, another newspaper owned by Murdoch’s News International.”

Solidarity states its belief in the “possibility that the NotW’s vendetta against Sheridan is being assisted by sections of the Scottish legal establishment and the police.”

The investigation by Lothian and Borders Police has cost over half a million pounds and gone on for more than a year. Solidarity has called for, “A public inquiry into how and why an unprecedented decision to launch a police inquiry was taken.”

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