

British Anarchists Found Not Guilty

Stuart Christie

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INTRODUCTION

The trial lasted 61 days, but in December a hand-picked jury pulled off a major surprise by finding four anarchist defendants in the British “Persons Unknown” trial not guilty!

The case started in 1978 when the British government’s elite Special Branch and Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) arrested Iris Mills, Dafydd Ladd, Ronan Bennet, Stewart Carr Vincent Stevenson and Trevor Dawton charged with being “terrorists” planning to take “positive steps” to overthrow society.

Originally charged with “conspiracy to cause explosions” (see “Anarchists Arrested in Britain,” FE #293–294, Aug. 21, 1978), the only proof the government had for such “terrorist” activity was the possession of some weed killer, sugar, flour and electrical wire at Iris Mills’ house (if that’s all it takes for proof of one’s “positive steps” to overthrow society, then there are millions of “terrorists” out there and the revolution is at hand). Seeing that this charge of “conspiracy” was so silly that it jeopardized their case, the state dropped them in favor of the more everyday charges of robbery.

In fact, the acquittals came as such a massive set-back for the state that the judge, Justice King-Hamilton, refused to dismiss the jury and ordered them to return the following day to hear the testimony and sentencing of Stewart Carr, one of the six comprising the original “Persons Unknown” group, but who later disassociated himself from the other defendants and pleaded guilty to the charges. Unfortunately for Carr, he was sentenced to nine years in prison (Dafydd Ladd, the other member of the original group, decided to skip bail and has gone underground).

Below is an article written by British anarchist Stuart Christie, which gives an overall view of the “Persons Unknown” trial and all of the controversy which ‘surrounded it. Stuart, who found himself in a similar situation eight years ago when he was implicated in the Angry Brigade trials and subsequently found not guilty, is one of the editors of the anarchist newspaper *Black Flag* and one of the original founders of the prisoners’ support group, the Anarchist Black Cross.

Crime is manufactured from the fantasies and prejudices of the police and judiciary and attributed to anyone who seems politically appropriate. A few state props and a jury “randomly” selected from a controlled list and the conjuring-show can begin. “Were it not for the tireless work of the police (applause) those in the dock would almost certainly have (insert chosen nightmare).” An anarchist believes in the end of society as we know it, X is an anarchist. The jury only has to complete the syllogism to convict, and cheer the sleight-of-hand.

Ronan Bennet, the prime target of police and security officers in the “Persons Unknown” trial, was the most vulnerable and likely of victims. Having spent 18 months in Northern Ireland’s internment camp, Long Kesh, Bennet was finally acquitted on appeal for the murder of a Belfast policeman. Knowing he would have a short life span

if he were to remain in Northern Ireland, with the ultra-rightwing Ulster Defense Association (UDA) sworn to kill him, he was obliged to leave home and move to England.

Like a growing number of Irish prisoners, Bennet had become interested in anarchism while in his British concentration camp and had been corresponding with Iris Mills of the Anarchist Black Cross. Having established a close friendship with Mills, Bennet went to live with her and her husband, Graham Rua, in Huddersfield.

Aware of his growing involvement in the Anarchist Black Cross, the local police, under instructions from London, kept the Huddersfield address under close surveillance. Obsessed with the doomsday-vision of the Irish situation spilling over to infect the heart of the monster, with the British and European anarchist movements combining forces with the more radical sections of the Irish republican movement—particularly the Irish National Liberation Army with whom they believed Bennet to have very close contacts—the police moved in and arrested everyone living in the Huddersfield house. They also raided the homes of all known associates in the area. Bennet and Mills were both charged under the all-purpose “Prevention of Terrorism” Act (PTA).

Self-Confessed Individuals

Unable to produce any evidence to satisfy the court that Bennet was a danger to society, or that he should be sent back to Northern Ireland (other than the fact that he was Irish and, like a good part of the population in Northern Ireland, had anti-Establishment politics) Bennet was released from custody—much to the astonishment and anger of the police who engineered the arrest. Was he not an anarchist? Had not he and Mills admitted it? Later, all the newspapers, including the supposedly unbiased Guardian, were to use the police phrase “self-confessed” anarchists as though no other proof of guilt was required.

Having made it quite clear to Bennet they believed his earlier acquittal on the murder charge to have been a travesty of justice, the police told him that one way or another they were going to “get him.” Next time the case against him was to be prepared with more attention to detail.

The case against Bennet, Mills and the other defendants in the “Persons Unknown” trial was coordinated and planned by Scotland Yard’s chief anarchist-spotter, Inspector Roy Cremer, who last surfaced in the Angry Brigade [1] investigation (a case, incidentally, in which I argued I was planted with explosives by the same squad). This time Cremer was assisted by West German GSG-9 agents operating in London. When Bennet and Mills were arrested again in London, the charge was more specific than the earlier PTA one—“conspiracy to cause explosions.” After all, what else would “self-confessed anarchists be doing with flour, sugar, weedkiller and electric wiring among their many household possessions?

As in every conspiracy show trial since time immemorial one arrest leads to another, and another, and another, until the state believes it has a sufficient number of people in the dock to allow the jury—if there is one—to salve its conscience by acquitting those against whom the prosecution presented minimal evidence other than that of association. The jury can then convict those portrayed as the main “conspirators.” After all the police would never have brought the case in the first place if they hadn’t been up to something—would they?

The Black Farce: Act II

As the committal proceedings dragged on, and it became increasingly clear there was no evidence at all to back up the charge of “causing” or “conspiring to cause “ explosions, the police quietly stopped feeding “shock horror” announcements to a voracious press. The original much publicised charge which led many to believe that the defendants were found in flagrante having intercourse with the devil and plotting to overthrow society, was suddenly dropped and charges of robbery substituted. Money replaced “idealism” as a motive.

In Act II of the black farce, an Austrian turned up out of the blue at Vince Stevenson’s flat where Trevor Dutton, another of the accused, happened to be staying, and left a suitcase filled with guns and sufficient evidence to implicate everyone involved, including Dafydd Ladd, now on the run, who was under constant surveillance by West German agents in this country (England) because of his involvement with the Red Army Fraction and the 2nd

June defense groups in Germany, and Black Aid, the German political prisoners relief organisation based at Rising Free, the left London bookshop. The prosecution's case was that Rising Free provided the main link between all the defendants. A chilling thought for the many people and groups who use it as a meeting place and mailing address.

The case itself was a showpiece of the power of judges. This was demonstrated as much in the way the proceedings were handled as in the extraordinary and unprecedented decision to bring the jury back to court the day after they had, delivered their verdict. Without actually telling them so, Judge King-Hamilton could not have indicated more clearly that he at least thought the jury had reached the wrong verdict. It was strange indeed to see people who have given their lives to support such a humanitarian idea as anarchism, being subjected to interrogation by a tedious, pompous and ill-briefed lawyer who, having spent his adult life advancing his career in our capitalist society, argues that their motives are dubious, their principles unworthy, and their defence a pack of lies. Incidentally, every time the prosecution said someone was lying the defense was able to produce evidence to back up its case. The police claimed, for instance, that when arrested Bennet tried to escape. The defence produced a passing cab driver who witnessed the arrest, but for his civic pains he too was called a liar. Fortunately, the fare, a barrister, was able to corroborate his evidence.

Books as Proof of Guilt

Of all the anarchist books ever published, the only one the prosecution turned to was the Anarchist Cookbook, a publication which has nothing to do with anarchism and is a silly and highly dangerous "guide" to the home manufacture of explosives. The prosecution seemed to be implying with this exhibit that its mere possession was irrefutable evidence of guilt. Presumably, one automatically agrees and acts on every book in one's possession. I wonder what his reaction would have been had he known that as a bookseller I have been pestered for some considerable time by numerous police authorities, including the Scotland Yard library, Bramshill Police College and various obscure sections of the Ministry of Defence to supply them With copies of this particular title. In fact, had it not been for this trial and the related publicity, and the earlier demand from government agencies, there would be little or no demand for the book and no copies available in the United Kingdom. As it is we now have orders for over 200! Not even an anarchist witness likening the book to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion managed to convince Mr. Justice King-Hamilton otherwise. But, other than adding to the paranoid fantasies of the state, what had all this to do with the charges before the court of armed robberies?

Ultimately, the state had to rely on its carefully selected jury. Were they influenced by the bigotry of the gutter press? Were they swayed by the knowledge that they too had come under the scrutiny of the states police before being called for jury service, been closely examined by a Kafkaesque committee, and could just as easily be the next victims? Did the judge's anti-anarchist bias and obvious hostilities towards the prisoners combine with the heavy-handed, ill-mannered and laborious prosecution case to swing them in favor of the defense? Were they sufficiently impressed by the defendants, and in particular Ronan Bennet's obvious sincerity and eloquent conduct of his own case?

Class Justice

Whatever the answers, one way or another the jury finally decided the innocence of the accused. As an anarchist and comrade of the defendants their guilt or innocence was never of importance to me. My sentiments on the question of robbing supermarkets is best summed up in a quote from Elisee Reclus, the anarchist geographer: "Personally, however I may feel about this or that action or individual, I shall never add my voice to the hateful clamour of men who mobilise armies, police-forces, magistrates, clergy and laws to preserve their privileges."

What was always of crucial importance in this case was that the two principal defendants, Iris Mills and Ronan Bennet, had obviously been selected as victims before any of the robberies with which they were eventually charged had taken place. The other defendants were woven into the "conspiracy" merely as make-weight through their politics and association with Bennet and Mills.

Faced with the machinations of the state police, the ignorance and bigotry of an old man long due for retirement, and an unsupported statement made by a fifth defendant leaned on by the police to plead guilty, it was wrongly thought the defendants stood little chance.

Class justice of such an obvious nature is not easily ignored. With this decision by the jury to acquit all the defendants in the face of what was almost a direct order to convict by the judge, the jury have asserted their right to oppose the political use of the courts and police against dissidents and those who oppose the power of the state to control their lives.

When the jury vetting [2] scandal broke Sam Silkin, self-styled socialist supporter of jury vetting in politically sensitive cases, said in its defence that it was either that or the abolition of juries altogether, to be replaced no doubt by something similar to the Diplock [3] courts in Northern Ireland.

The decision to acquit by a vetted jury in this case has proved that vetting does not work. Doubtless, as you read these lines, the political and legal establishment are discussing how best to sugar the pill of non-jury trials in future "sensitive" cases.

The writing is on the wall.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The Angry Brigades were an armed struggle group that operated in England during the first part of the 1970s. See *The Angry Brigade*, available from the FE Bookstore.

2. "Vetting" is the British term that essentially means, to investigate or look into something. In this case, it meant that the government and prosecution selected who they wanted on the jury in an attempt to stack the deck against defendants.

3. Named after its maker mind, Lord Diplock, it is a court system that has done away with the jury and consists of only three judges, who make all final decisions. The implications of such a court is obvious and there is a strong movement on England to replace the jury system with the Diplock method.

NOTE: This article originally appeared in the British magazine, *Time Out*.

LAST MINUTE NEWS!

As we go to press, we've just received the news that the police harassment of Ronan Bennet did not end with the trial. It seems that he was arrested on Feb. 11 on suspicion of burglary.

He was held for two hours and then set free, after the police threatened that they were 'going to get him.'

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