

10 February 2023

‘Right to protest’ bill defeated in the Lords

The government has suffered a ‘bruising series of defeats’ in the House of Lords, which defied government plans to severely curtail the right to protest.

The bill, if passed, would have given police the power to stop protests on suspicion that they could be disruptive, effectively curtailing the ability of PCS members to protest peacefully in support of the national pay campaign and other issues.

Originally presented as a measure aimed at clamping down on protests such as those mounted by environmentalist groups like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, the powers given to police within the bill could easily have been applied to trade union demonstrations, anti-racist demonstrations, or any type of protest. Without doubt, this posed a threat to the trade union movement, to the wider labour movement and to civil liberties as a whole.

The Lords voted against the clause by a majority of 254 to 240

A clause within the bill that would have extended police powers of stop and search was also rejected by an even bigger margin. Intervening in the debate, PCS parliamentary group member, Baroness Shami Chakrabarti said too many young black men ‘have had their first experience of the state and the police service via a racially discriminatory stop and search’.

The Lords also voted in defiance of the Tory government by a majority of 91 to back safeguards for journalists within the bill.

What next for the bill?

The bill will now return to the House of Commons for consideration of the Lords amendments. However, the government cannot now return the proposals to the Lords as they were only introduced to the bill at that stage and were not originally included in the bill when set before the Commons.

While this is still far from being over, it represents a serious and significant defeat to the government and its plans to attack our right to protest.