

David Binns *Bahrain Legal Complaint: A Solidarity Issue*

6 May 2018

The Struggle Continues

An agenda item at the branch meeting of 1st February 2018 addressed reprisal moves in Bahrain by state operatives of that country. Their target was and remains family members of Sayed Alwadaei, Director of Advocacy at London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) and friend of our UCU branch. A leaflet which I wrote for the meeting, centred on the Early Day Motion concerning those events, is available on our website (1).

The EDM aroused serious interest within the labour movement and among human rights activists. It secured the signatures of 64 MPs. Nonetheless it is one episode, albeit an important one, of an ongoing struggle.

Royal Windsor Horse Show: The Legal Complaint

Presently BIRD is seeking to file a legal complaint with the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development. It concerns the relationship between various parties and reported events at the Royal Windsor Horse Show last year. Sayed has summarised the incidents in question as follows:

"Bahraini authorities unlawfully intimidated Bahraini protesters in the UK, by detaining, interrogating and threatening their family members back in Bahrain for several hours. Simultaneously, in the UK, plainclothes officers presumed to be from Bahraini intelligence, followed and photographed peaceful protesters throughout the showground, tore banners from their hands, and filmed them as they were escorted away. The harassment did not end there: the same officers also followed British journalists and UK-based activists back to London."

The full article by Sayed, including his account of BIRD's rationale for filing the complaint, can be read at the BIRD website (2).

What Can We Do?

First, the www.crowdjustice.com link below contains an appeal for financial pledges in support

of the legal complaint. As individuals we can all make a material difference, however much or little we feel able to offer. Remember every pledge is an act of solidarity, which is also a material force.

Second, we can let friends and contacts know this is a live campaign. For branch members with a taste and flair for social media there is the option of retweeting BIRD's appeal for support (3). For others, like myself, there is also email, or even word of mouth.

Root Of Opposition

The Bahraini labour movement has a history of opposition to both British colonial and domestic reaction. In the past, especially between the 1930's and 1970's, organised oil workers and their allies generally took centre stage. More recently the Bahrain Teachers Association played a major role in the great movement of 2011. The violent suppression of that struggle was the trigger which brought UCU London Retired Members into solidarity activity.

There was nothing accidental or contingent about our engagement. The front line agents of repression in Manama operate under command of a Bahraini security elite inseparable from the British state and its Gulf allies, notably Saudi Arabia. Imperial complicity extends further still. The bloody massacre which ended the 2011 mass protests took place beneath the silent gaze of American armed power, for Bahrain is host to the US Fifth Fleet and Naval Command. On 5th April of this year the US forces were joined by a new British base - the first official permanent UK military presence for almost half a century. Its construction is a clear message of regime approval from core sectors of the British ruling class and their state.

Bahraini royals are regular and prominent participants at the Royal Horse Show. The event is an absurdly glitzy annual occasion socially structured around elements from ruling class circles in both Britain and key allies. There even seems something of the spirit of the fox hunt about "the day" - witness not only its landed elite patronage but also the abundance of fur merchandise apparently available from show exhibitors (4).

Bahrain, it is important to remember, is no exotic otherworld. Its rulers, much like those of Britain, like to project an aura of an enduring, timeless culture with supposed unique values and traditions. Look a little closer and you will see something more mundane. As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council the country is locked into global financial markets and the parasitic structures of what now is generally theorised as Neoliberalism (5) - the central international ruling class strategy since the days of Reagan and Thatcher, when it was known as the politics and philosophy of the New Right.

The Bahraini variant is well described by Toby Matthiesen:

"Real estate speculation, land reclamation and the need of multinational companies for local middlemen strengthened a crony capitalist class made up of the ruling family and a small group of Sunni and Shi'i business families. The wealth of the few visibly contrasted with the circumstances of most Bahrainis, who increasingly came to feel that they were being left behind." (6)

If Matthiesen's account sounds familiar to readers in Britain, there should be no surprise in view of the affinity and longstanding relationship between the British state and the reigning family of Bahrain. Parallels between the two societies abound. For example, the City of London's shabby reputation as an international money laundering centre (7) is increasingly matched by the secrecy premium associated with Bahrain's substantial post-oil financial sector (8). Equally striking, and related, are the intensified inequalities manifest in both countries since the late 1970s. The current hyper-parasitic bourgeois financialisation phase is associated with a tendency for wealth to *trickle up* in Bahrain as much as in Britain, however little this is visible at the Windsor Royal Horse Show.

One apparent difference, alongside the absence of democracy in Bahrain, is the relative scale and salience of ongoing state violence there. Yet in this regard also, beneath the surface the distinction is less clear. The regime is reinforced by international armed state forces. These are presided over by mainly Anglo-American trained and tooled senior security personnel. In Bahrain there is additionally a history of British *in situ* advisors.

For all the secrecy surrounding these relationships, there is no essential mystery. A favoured conjuring trick of imperial powers involves their propensity to export forces and relations of violence. In their projected form these and their consequences then justify depiction of the domain of *the distant other* as a source of imminent threat or danger. The masters of aggression thus portray themselves and their domestic subjects as actual or potential victims of evil originating *over there*. The British ruling class has centuries of experience of such smoke and mirrors shows, with the Gulf and wider Middle East a major theatre.

Support for the BIRD complaint is an extension of our earlier solidarity work and its class roots. Please help as you feel able and spread the word.

NOTES:

1] <http://ucu-retired-london.org.uk/early-day-motion-bahrain/>

2] <https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/windsor-horse-show/>

- 3] <https://twitter.com/BirdBahrain>
- 4] <https://www.facebook.com/pg/RoyalWindsorHorseShow/reviews/>
- 5] Adam Hanieh *Capitalism and Class in the Arab Gulf States*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- 6] <https://www.merip.org/mero/mero021314>
- 7] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-43574268>
- 8] <http://www.financialsecrecyindex.com/PDF/Bahrain.pdf>