

# Mass arrests at anti-war demo in Britain

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Police arrested 170 people on October 22 at the Faslane naval base near Glasgow, Scotland. The base was blockaded by between 500 and 1,000 demonstrators during a four-hour protest. Though convened by the pacifist Trident Ploughshares campaign prior to September 11, the demonstration became a focus for opposition to the US bombing of Afghanistan. It followed a recent demonstration against the war in Glasgow that attracted up to 3,000 predominantly young people, indicating broad opposition to the ongoing destruction of Afghanistan.

Among those arrested were two members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs)—Tommy Sheridan of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and Lloyd Quinlan, a former TV weather presenter, now an MSP for the Scottish National Party (SNP)—and a member of the European Parliament, Patricia McKenna of the Irish Green Party. Also detained were Billy Wolfe, a former leader of the SNP, and Isobel Lindsay, a leading member of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

For many decades Faslane has been the principle site for the British government's submarine based nuclear arsenal. During the Cold War, Polaris missile carrying submarines were maintained at Faslane. A nearby, now closed, base at the Holy Loch was run by the US Navy. In the 1990s, newer submarines carrying Trident nuclear missiles replaced British Polaris vessels. Faslane, along with the Devonport base in the south coast of England, also hosts the British nuclear powered attack submarine fleet, many of which have been directly involved in attacks on Afghanistan.

Since 1982, pacifist protestors have maintained a small camp of caravans and tents on the roadside near the Faslane base. But in recent years, there has been an increase in activity around Faslane, broadly simultaneous with the global upsurge in anti-capitalist protest.

As with all political matters in Scotland, the protests have a distinct nationalist tinge. The SSSP, SNP and others seek to utilise the Faslane protests and opposition to nuclear weapons as an argument for extended greater powers to the Scottish Parliament so that it can abolish the nuclear industry. Sheridan has been arrested at Faslane demonstrations on a number of other occasions, the last time in February 2001, along with Labour MP George Galloway, 15 churchmen and 377 other protestors.

Just days earlier, Sheridan was cleared of charges of "breach of the peace" at Helensburgh Sheriff Court. The presiding Justice of the Peace, Alasdair Stirling, called for an end to mass arrests at nuclear bases because they infringed people's human rights.

But the Crown Prosecution Service indicated that it would appeal the decision, due to its determination to take a hardline against anti-nuclear and anti-war protests. Jonathon Kemp, procurator fiscal depute for Dumbarton, wrote to Sheridan to warn him of his intention to appeal, stating: "In this case the evidence that the traffic was being obstructed was, if accepted, sufficient to constitute breach of the peace." The test for breach of the peace in Scottish law has always been whether protestors conduct is causing, or is likely to cause alarm.

The police ignored Sterling's advice and clamped down hard on the protest, making 170 arrests. These arrests, together with that of Sheridan only days after his acquittal on the same charge, constitute a direct challenge to the right to peaceful protest.

Human rights experts are reported to have warned Strathclyde Police that they could be guilty of wrongfully arresting all those detained at the demonstration if they have breached the European Convention on Human Rights. Professor Allan Miller, the UK director of the international human rights consultancy McGrigor Donald, told the press, "The

European Convention gives people the right to peaceful protest, and police would be on shaky ground if they interfered with people doing that”.



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