

Britain: Pupils join nationwide school strike to protest war vs. Iraq

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More than 10,000 pupils nationwide staged a school strike in protest at the war against Iraq on Wednesday March 19. The action, mainly involving young people aged between 13- and 18-years-old, was the largest school protest since the 1970s.

Schools had warned their pupils not to participate in the strike, which was called by the Stop the War coalition, and in some instances had padlocked gates in an attempt to stop children leaving. They had also warned that pupils absent from school, even with parental permission to participate in demonstrations, would be marked as truants. At one school in Cornwall, 20 pupils were suspended for joining in protests. In Britain, high school runs from 12 to 16 years of age.

Despite the threats thousands of schoolchildren gathered in towns and cities across the country. In Birmingham, 5,000 pupils walked out of schools across the city, gathering in the city centre where they attempted to storm the main local authority building. Some 1,000 pupils demonstrated in Sheffield, 300 in Swansea and in Edinburgh. Hundreds of students brought traffic to a halt as they protested outside the US Embassy. Ilkley Grammar School in West Yorkshire was forced to close for the day after 500 pupils walked out and in Leicester police set up patrols outside some schools to prevent children leaving.

There were clashes between police and schoolchildren on several of the demonstrations. In London's Parliament Square, where hundreds of school students gathered to protest the war, police forcibly removed students—some as young as 13 years old—who were staging a sit-down protest.

In Manchester, where 3,000 pupils participated in the strike, 14 students were arrested when they staged a sit-down in the city.

EM, a young reader of the *World Socialist Web Site*

was on the demonstration in Manchester and submitted this report:

Being in front of Manchester Town Hall today was an eye opening experience to say the least. Approximately ten police vans pulled up just before three o'clock and the police just spilled out into Albert Square.

The antiwar demonstration had moved down Oxford Road and along Deansgate in central Manchester peacefully. The problem came when they neared Albert Square [by the main Town Hall]. Half of the demonstrators, mainly school and university students, were allowed through into the Square whilst the other half were penned into a small section of John Dalton Street by eight mounted policemen, police on foot and then, as if that wasn't enough, a blockade of police vans and motorcycles.

Looking at the police vans and the "wall" of police, you'd have expected to see hundreds of aggressive demonstrators rather than the peaceful gathering that had been penned in.

Back in Albert Square the police were getting heavy handed with protesters. One girl fell to the ground and as her friends tried to assist her the police dragged her out of the area and left her on the ground in the middle of the road. Everyone watching was shocked and people started reaching for mobile phones and cameras. The police were telling people in no uncertain terms that they were not allowed to take photographs.

The buzz in the air was a mixture of antiwar chants, people talking into their phones about the aggressive police behaviour and the sound of the police telling the crowd to do exactly what they were told or they "will be libel for arrest under section 12 of the Public Order Act".

It was not easy to work out the number of people who were demonstrating. According to the BBC News web

site, 14 arrests took place. From the people I saw there, 14 arrests seems very high, especially as around half of those protesting against the war were schoolchildren.

The police were being challenged by onlookers and protesters. They answered the question “Why can’t we take photos?” by saying, “Because I said so, you’re not allowed, so leave it.”

I stepped forward and began asking, in a lighthearted manner, which part of the Public Order Act banned people from taking photographs. The police backed down. The police started asking the children why they were not at school and suggested that they should be careful if they didn’t want to be arrested. I asked the police why they were not arresting the people who were selling cigarettes to these children.

Finally the demonstration was herded into Albert Square which was then surrounded by the police and for sometime people could not leave the square. I left once the police barrier relaxed somewhat.

It was good to see the schoolchildren at the demonstration. It gives me hope that there will be those willing to stand up and be counted in the future. What was saddening to read was the Whalley Range School for Girls head teacher being quoted saying that it was “disgraceful” that pupils were taking part in the protest. Yes, they should be at school, but surely we should be encouraging children to get involved in politics. After all, it is their future. The continuing worry of political leaders and teachers that young people aren’t interested in politics is not helped by this negative attitude from someone that we rely upon for the development of our children.



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