

Britain: Police use anti-terror powers against environmental protest

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The Camp for Climate Action got under way Tuesday amidst a major police operation and provocative “terror” stories in the media.

The week-long camp, which is to feature seminars and teach-ins on environmental degradation and its causes, is located near the site of a proposed third runway and sixth terminal building at London’s Heathrow airport. Some 800 homes are to be demolished to make way for the new extension. One of the busiest in the world, with a plane taking off every 45 seconds, environmentalists state that the airport is already responsible for causing the equivalent of 31 million tonnes of CO2 emissions annually, even before the planned extension.

The British Airports Authority (BAA), which runs Heathrow, had sought to effectively ban the protest by seeking a High Court injunction barring protesters from using broad swathes of the London Underground and sections of the motorway and land surrounding Heathrow airport.

The legal bid was sought under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, originally introduced to protect individuals from stalkers. In court, BAA claimed that its sweeping injunction was aimed at protecting the safety of its employees and passengers, who might be placed at risk by the protest. It also argued that the camp could be used as a cover by terrorists seeking to attack the airport.

In the event, the High Court ruled that BAA’s order was too broad to define and imposed a more limited injunction against three members of Plane Stupid, a direct action group, barring them from Heathrow’s property.

The ruling was hailed as a victory by civil liberties organizations and environmental groups, but events have disproved such claims. The injunction against the Plane Stupid members was made despite the fact that none have been charged, let alone convicted of criminal activity.

Moreover, the order did not only allow BAA to bar specific individuals from the protest. Writing in the *New*

Statesman, Plane Stupid’s Robbie Gillett explained that it had “some disturbing consequences for Plane Stupid’s members regarding freedom of speech. This is because anyone who breaches the injunction ‘in concert with Plane Stupid’ is also covered.

“This means that if anyone from Plane Stupid (that is anyone who has been arrested on Plane Stupid actions and spokespeople) aids, abets or incites direct action against Heathrow until the 31st August (when the injunction expires), they will be in breach of the injunction.

“Plane Stupid has already had to alter one of their workshops at the camp. Members of Plane Stupid (such as myself) are now having to watch what they say.

“For example, could acknowledging the importance of direct action to the Chartist and Suffragette movements in a press interview at the camp count as incitement? Our lawyers are unsure.”

Just as significant, the High Court agreed with BAA that there was a risk that “a terrorist group may use the disruption caused by the protesters to perpetrate a terrorist act.”

This supposed threat has now been used to justify police implementing anti-terror powers.

The *Guardian* revealed that the Brown government “has encouraged police forces to make greater use of terrorism powers ‘especially the use of stop and search powers under s44 Terrorism Act 2000’.”

A legal document produced for the High Court hearing on the protest by Metropolitan Police Commander Peter Broadhurst stated, “Should individuals or small groups seek to take action outside of lawful protest they will be dealt with robustly using terrorism powers. This is because the presence of large numbers of protesters at or near the airport will reduce our ability to proactively counter the terrorist act [threat]”.

The powers give the police the right to stop and search people even if they are not suspected of criminal activity

and to detain people for up to one month without charge.

The police measures have been aided by scare stories in the media. The *Telegraph* asserted, “A hard core of anarchist demonstrators are drawing up plans to bring Heathrow to a standstill using an array of tactics including disguising themselves as ordinary holidaymakers to cause havoc in the airport terminals.”

There are “also fears they could be planning bomb hoaxes and assaults on the airport’s security fence,” the *Telegraph* added. It also reported, without substantiation, that another tactic under discussion, “which would cause major panic in the aftermath of the attempted bombing of Glasgow airport, is to buy a scrap car, drive it into a road to be blocked and then slash the tyres.”

The media campaign helped to enable the police to mount a major operation against the Camp for Climate Action, with the intention of intimidating anyone protesting over what they see as social, political or, in this instance, environmental injustices. There is in addition a clear danger that the police may provoke a confrontation in order to legitimize such repressive measures.

With just several hundred people so far on the camp site, police officers currently outnumber protesters twelve to one. On Monday more than two dozen police entered the camp to inspect the site, on private land near the airport. They also sealed off the lane nearby the field.

Two people were arrested under the terrorism powers. According to the *Guardian*, student Cristina Fraser was cycling near the airport when she was stopped by police and charged under section 58 of the Terrorism Act, which makes it an offence to record something that could be used for terrorist purposes.

Fraser, who has been involved in previous demonstrations with Plane Stupid, told the newspaper, “I was arrested and held in a police cell for 30 hours. I was terrified. No one knew where I was. They knew I was not a terrorist.”

She was later recharged with conspiring to cause a public nuisance.

A man was also arrested for “failing to explain how he bought a young person’s rail ticket.”

Indymedia alleged that people were being intercepted and searched at local rail stations. One blog reported that police were “demanding to search everything entering the site and even copying every piece of available information from mobile phones, such as serial numbers and phone numbers stored in the address book.”

In a separate protest, police arrested six people who had chained themselves to BAA’s headquarters near

Heathrow, with a banner reading, “No to airport expansion.”

According to reports in *Indymedia*, 25 police dressed in black also forced their way into the camp on Tuesday evening. A camp spokesman said, “A large number of police attempted to break into the camp and they were peacefully removed by a large crowd of protesters with their hands in the air who gradually moved the police away.

“The police gave us no warning and did not say why they were coming on the site. They did it after the media left.”

Thought to be part of a Forward Intelligence Team (FIT), the police eventually left the premises, but fully uniformed riot police are stationed at the camp gate. Police are also said to be photographing everyone arriving at the camp and using automatic number plate recognition technology to identify vehicles.

Press commentary makes clear that the target of the police action and the hysterical media coverage is not simply the Heathrow camp, but political protest in general.

The *Daily Mail*, under a typically incendiary headline, “Militants plot to paralyse Heathrow with hoax bombs and security fence attacks,” ominously cited Damian Hockney, a member of the Metropolitan Police Authority, stating, “There is a price to pay for democracy, and this demo could cost us something like £7 million in policing. We have to ask ourselves how an event like this can operate in a way which demands such a level of policing, and such diversion of resources.”



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