

Britain: Riot police attack Heathrow Airport protest

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A week of saturation policing of the peaceful environmental protest at Heathrow Airport concluded on Sunday with a series of brutal attacks on those involved in the Camp for Climate Action.

The protest is located near the site of a proposed third runway and fifth terminal building at London's Heathrow airport. The fifth terminal is set to open next March, and the runway is proposed for around 2020. Environmental groups have targeted one of the busiest airports in the world because the number of flights could increase from the current limit of 480,000 per year to almost 800,000.

The week-long camp was located between the M4 motorway and the airport's northern perimeter in west London, between the villages of Sipson and Harlington. Protesters finally left the camp on Monday after a final 24 hours of events that included "direct action" protests at several sites around the country, including the Sizewell nuclear power plant in Suffolk and the entrance to the BP oil firm's headquarters in London. Protesters also ended their occupation at the entrance to the headquarters of the British Airports Authority (BAA) near Heathrow.

Riot squads attacked protesters with truncheons as they headed from the camp site at around 3:00 p.m. Sunday and proceeded towards the headquarters of BAA, the owners of the airport. Many women and children were among the campaigners. Mounted police were also used to intimidate and surround a large group of protesters in a field near local residential housing.

One eyewitness described the violence employed by the police to the Indymedia website:

"When the group left from the rear of the camp, at first mounted police tried to ride into people but soon backed off and allowed them to stream across the field. As the people approached the opposite side of the field there were many vans of riot police arriving in adjacent streets and deploying to meet the protesters. There were even van loads of police getting changed into their riot gear on the

M4 motorway before scrambling up the bank. As protesters moved along the fence or tried to climb out of the field the police attacked them with batons and shields. I saw several hit, punched, repeatedly thrown to the ground, pushed into ditches, and sworn at. Over the next 15 minutes more and more riot police kept arriving (something like 100), many running into the field following mounted police that had galloped into a gap in the fence. Police prevented media from entering the field and a high hedge prevented them filming the scenes in the field."

Medics at the site had to treat at least five people for head injuries and another person who had been trampled by a horse. A total of six protesters were arrested, bringing the total arrested since the camp began to 58.

The organisers said that despite the unprovoked police attack, some 300 protesters managed to reach the BAA headquarters and organised a sit-down occupation at the entrance and car park. Once there, they unfurled a banner stating, "Social Change Not Lifestyle Change." Police surrounded the protesters and attempted to forcibly remove them from the site.

Another march that began at noon on Sunday to the local village of Sipson, and which consisted of parents and their children, was also subjected to police obstruction and harassment, according to Indymedia. According to a report, the march "was held up every 100 meters or so by police with no clear reason stated by them. Several police vans were in front of the kids' march and several behind."

A spokesman for the police claimed that the protestors had initiated the conflict, stating, "Some demonstrators were seen to cover their faces and be in possession of homemade shields.... Missiles were thrown at police and a police officer was unseated from his horse."

The police had stated their "concerns of imminent violence" even prior to the camp being set up, with the

media joining and denouncing protesters as “anarchists” or “terrorists” whose actions were wholly “undemocratic.”

In the lead-up to the protest, BAA applied for an injunction at the High Court seeking to ban the protest from taking place. The injunction sought to ban members and supporters of Airport Watch, a coalition of environment groups, from approaching Heathrow, but also included most environmental groups in the UK including the National Trust, Woodland Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Campaign to Protect Rural England—which together total nearly 5 million people. The injunction called for the arrest of anyone failing to give 24 hours’ notice of a protest for travelling on sections of the motorway or from standing on platforms 6 and 7 at Paddington station in London to catch the Heathrow Express.

The area that BAA specified to be covered in the injunction encompassed a large part of the south of England and the capital, London, and included “All railway trains and carriages operating upon the Piccadilly line of the London Underground System; the M4 and all service stations between and including junctions 3 and 6; and the M25 and all service stations between and including junctions 13 and 15...”

The High Court did not rule in favour of banning the protest, but ordered that three members of Plane Stupid, a direct-action group, be prevented from entering onto Heathrow’s property. In so doing, the High Court supported the assertions of the police and associated the activities of the Camp for Climate Change with terrorism. The ruling stated that “a terrorist group may use the disruption caused by the protesters to perpetrate a terrorist act.”

The police used this as a pretext to mount a massive security operation involving 1,800 officers and culminating in Sunday’s assault. Under Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, they searched every person and all vehicles of those protesting. Under the Terrorism Act 2006 Section 44, police also took photos of everybody entering and leaving the camp. Under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act, the police were authorised to carry out stop-and-search powers within a 2-mile radius of Heathrow from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

The police also stopped a march by several hundred protesters in nearby Harmondsworth Village, where a reported total of 4,000 homes would be threatened by the construction of a third runway involving the forced

relocation of 10,000 people.

Several protesters denounced the use of repressive legislation and media reports. Alex Harvey said, “It is absolutely diabolical to be using terrorism powers in this way. We are not terrorists. It is a complete abuse of these laws.” Peter McDonnell told the *Daily Telegraph*, “There’s been so much media hysteria about baby-eating anarchists. What we’re saying is that this is a peaceful protest. The only thing we are armed with is the consensus of the scientific community.” Another activist quoted in the *Scotsman* newspaper said, “To invoke anti-terrorist legislation to stop us from our protest is really inappropriate and irresponsible.”

The organisers of the protest had in fact pledged not to disrupt passengers using Heathrow Airport or to enter onto any of the runways. The main delegation of protesters on Sunday stood in a field under a banner reading, “We are armed.... Only with peer-reviewed science.” The “direct action” authorised by the Camp for Climate Action focused largely on a small group of protesters locking themselves to the gates of a nearby Israeli firm that flies produce to the UK. Another example took place on Sunday, when another small group including protesters and members of the local community walked the 3-kilometre (1.8-mile) route of the boundary of the proposed third runway.

The police operation against the Camp for Climate Action has far-reaching implications. Laws introduced by the Labour government over the past 10 years under the pretext of combating “terrorism” have laid the legislative framework of a police state aimed at curtailing or removing outright democratic rights won over centuries of struggle. Protests and demonstrations, including even the smallest and peaceful gatherings, can now be summarily broken up and violently dispersed at the whim of judges and the police.



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