

# Britain: Police make mass “preemptive” arrest of protesters in Nottingham

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In the largest police operation ever mounted against environmental protesters, more than 114 people were arrested in Sneinton, Nottingham, England on April 13. Some 200 police officers were involved in the operation from Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. Officers were also involved from the British Transport Police.

Police mounted the preemptive arrests at a community centre and adjacent school on the unprecedented basis that those detained were preparing a protest at the nearby Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station. The power station is the third largest source of carbon dioxide emissions in the UK and has been the location of previous protests by environmental groups.

Without providing any evidence, police stated that those detained had posed “a serious threat” to the power stations operations. A spokeswoman for the police said, “From the information gathered, police believe that those arrested were planning a period of prolonged disruption to the safe running of Ratcliffe-On-Soar power station.”

Those arrested were held on suspicion of conspiracy to commit aggravated trespass and criminal damage. All were released without charge the following day. In the meantime, police used the arrests to mount searches on various homes, seizing computers and personal paperwork.

According to one local resident quoted on the Indymedia UK web site, the police damaged school property. He also said the bolt-cutting equipment it was claimed police had uncovered belonged to the school. He added, “I live in Sneinton, am a community activist and know a bit about what happened. Now the point I’d like to make is that one: anything taken away by the police was not connected to the action planned, and that

two: the school may have to close down because of this damage caused by the police.”

Also searched were premises above the Nottingham’s Sumac Centre—a meeting place for local campaigning groups, including climate change organisations.

The raids came just days after 12 men were arrested in a simultaneous operation in the northwest of England. In that instance, police claimed the arrests were necessary to thwart an imminent terrorist attack. At the time of writing, no evidence has emerged to support police claims, and 11 of the men are still being held without charge. (See “The ‘anti-terror’ arrests in northwest England: what really lies behind them?”)

The Nottingham arrests were carried out as a military-style operation. Police blocked off roads and junctions leading to the community centre/school and surrounded the buildings. Local residents reported that they saw up to 20 riot police vans and a number of patrol cars surround the grounds of the buildings at around midnight. Scores of police with dogs smashed their way into the school, rounding up those inside.

One of the witnesses, Susan Lawson, said, “The police said to me ‘get in the house and don’t come out’. Then I saw them bringing people out of the school gates in handcuffs and putting them into vans. The vans kept coming back to pick up more of them. Police had big black and yellow bin bags full of something, which they took away. I was shocked, I couldn’t get back to sleep afterwards. It was terrible.”

In an interview with the *Guardian*, one activist described the operation as a “preemptive strike” and recalled how the police “bashed down the doors of the school.”

“It seemed to be a pretty sophisticated attempt by the police to neuter the whole climate movement,” he said. “They must have known about [the gathering] a long

time before. They even had colour-coded maps of the school. It was a huge operation. They were very pleased with themselves, talking about promotions and how it had been ‘intelligence-led.’”

He said, “Everyone was lined up and handcuffed. There were long queues of people waiting to be processed by the police.”

He added, “One arresting officer was quite out of order and asked people if they were proud of being terrorists.”

## Assault on democratic rights

The Nottingham arrests mark an escalation in the assault on the democratic and civil rights of the population by the government. Those arrested had not committed any offence but were detained on the basis that they may have planned to participate in a protest—a gross infringement on fundamental liberties, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech.

During the G20 summit in London earlier this month, police raided two squats on the second day of the summit. They made a number of arrests and detained scores of people who were photographed and handcuffed, and then made to sit in the street. This was prior to any demonstrations that were to be held later that day.

Speaking about the Nottingham arrests, Shona Jainjuah, from the Camp for Climate Action, said, “First the police violently attack the climate camp during the G20, and now 114 people are arrested before they have actually done anything. People should be very concerned about how the police are stepping over the line in the way they are targeting activists.”

The mass arrests have prompted condemnation from civil and human rights groups. A leading column in the *Independent* newspaper, entitled “Mass arrests have no place in a democratic country”, stated, “People tend to be uncomfortable with the idea that someone can be arrested before a crime has been committed—and rightly so. It smacks of totalitarian regimes and the thought police.”

Clearly, such police measures are not confined to this one incident. In March, the *Guardian* published the

results of an investigation that revealed that the police have established a database of thousands of political campaigners, covering all manner of issues. The investigation also found that this information was being stored in the database for at least seven years.

The newspaper report stated, “Photographs, names and video footage of people attending protests are routinely obtained by surveillance units and stored on an ‘intelligence system’. The Metropolitan police, which has pioneered surveillance at demonstrations and advises other forces on the tactic, stores details of protesters on Crimint, the general database used daily by all police staff to catalogue criminal intelligence. It lists campaigners by name, allowing police to search which demonstrations or political meetings individuals have attended.”

Other names stored in the database include those of journalists. The investigation noted, “Police surveillance teams are also targeting journalists who cover demonstrations, and are believed to have monitored members of the press during at least eight protests over the last year.”

Amongst its findings were that “Activists ‘seen on a regular basis’ as well as those deemed on the ‘periphery’ of demonstrations are included on the police databases, regardless of whether they have been convicted or arrested.”

“Names, political associations and photographs of protesters from across the political spectrum—from campaigners against the third runway at Heathrow to anti-war activists—are catalogued.”

The all-encompassing nature of state surveillance of political activists was underscored by the newspaper’s disclosure that “Police forces are exchanging information about protesters stored on their intelligence systems, enabling officers from different forces to search which political events an individual has attended.”



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