

Danish police arrest nearly 1,000 protesters at climate conference

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Large numbers of Danish riot police intervened brutally to arrest nearly 1,000 activists during a protest march held Saturday in Copenhagen. Without provocation, phalanxes of heavily armed police rushed sections of the peaceful demonstration to carry out the mass arrests.

An estimated 100,000 demonstrators marched through the centre of Copenhagen to protest the failure of delegates at the United Nations Climate Change Conference to arrive at any binding agreement on global warming. The march, dominated by youthful protesters, was the central event in a “Day of Action” that included rallies and demonstrations in countries around the world.

Despite the peaceful character of the demonstration, units of Danish riot police employed so-called “kettling” tactics, whereby heavily armed special squads move in to isolate particular sections of large demonstrations. As the march approached the conference centre, riot police cordoned off a large group of demonstrators at the rear. Nearly 1,000 were detained, cuffed and forced to sit for hours in long lines on the freezing street of Amagerbrogade, one of the city’s major shopping venues.

Video clips posted on YouTube showed scores of police descending on protesters, handcuffing them and forcing them to sit down on the street. Other clips showed police with dogs patrolling the lines of detained demonstrators.

One 21-year-old Danish student, Leah, told the AAP news agency that trouble began on the march when the police commenced their “kettling” tactics. As riot police moved in, demonstrators began to panic and the police then arrested up to 400 people.

“The police came and took all of the group. For sure, they didn’t do anything,” said the Danish student.

“They [the police] were just waiting for something to happen to take all of them.”

The student’s account was backed up by Simon Sheikh of the Australian social and political network “Get Up,” who told the BBC that he witnessed the detentions from his apartment in the centre of the city. “The police rounded up protesters in a pre-planned manoeuvre,” he said. “It was unprovoked. They rounded up a group, including women and children, and pushed them into a store before splitting them into groups and handcuffing them.”

Commenting on the police action, the director of the World Development Movement, Deborah Doane, told reporters, “It’s absolutely outrageous that the police responded in this extreme manner on an incredibly family-friendly march. It’s a complete violation of the right to protest and a step towards the breakdown of democracy.”

The Climate Justice Action group also claimed that protesters had been indiscriminately arrested by Danish police.

A police spokesman sought to justify the mass arrests by claiming that some protesters had thrown stones and were garbed in black so as to conceal their identity. However, reporters for the AAP agency noted that when they were allowed to go behind police lines, they saw that the protesters detained and sitting on the pavement were not dressed in black, and there did not appear to be any broken windows.

Indicating the unwarranted nature of the riot squad sweep, a police spokesman said that only four or five of the 968 persons arrested would be charged and would appear in court. A Copenhagen police spokeswoman confirmed that two Britons had been deported for spitting.

The mass arrests on Saturday were preceded by a

number of selective arrests carried out the previous day. Danish police arrested 68 members of the group Our Climate—Not Your Business on suspicion that they might commit illegal acts. The police are allowed to arrest people on the basis of unsubstantiated suspicions since the recent passage by the Danish parliament of a controversial law that gives police the power to preemptively arrest anyone they believe is likely to break the law.

The mass arrests took place at the halfway point in the two-week conference, which has been characterized by the inability of delegates to arrive at anything approaching a binding international pact to stem global warming. At the end of last week, environment ministers rejected a draft proposal circulated at the summit, arguing that it did not make sufficient demands on developing countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions.

For their part, the developing countries, including China and India, have argued that they require greater financial assistance from the developed industrial countries to implement adequate environmental measures. The political atmosphere at the conference was poisoned earlier last week by the leak of the so-called Danish text, which proposed allowing wealthy countries to release twice as much carbon per capita as poor countries for the next 40 years.

After delegates from a number of African states adamantly rejected the Danish text proposals, conference leaders sought to play down its significance. Nevertheless, the battle lines had been drawn.

The first week of the conference also saw the US delegates taking a hard line against Washington's trade rival China. Last Wednesday, the top US climate negotiator, Todd D. Stern, flatly rejected arguments by representatives of poorer countries that the US and other industrialized nations should make reparations for the damage wrought by uncontrolled industrial pollution over the last century. Stern specifically rejected suggestions that the US provide financial aid to rapidly developing countries like China and India to help them convert their heavy industries to less pollution-intensive methods.

Stern's offensive against China was echoed last week by Australian Climate Change Minister Penny Wong, who identified China as the major obstacle to a climate deal. "The world looks to China for leadership and for

China to play a constructive and positive role at these negotiations," Wong warned.

The response from the Chinese side was swift. He Yafei, China's vice foreign minister, declared that Beijing was stunned by Stern's comments. "I was shocked to read the US negotiator's comments, he said, adding, "Developed countries need to deliver." He Yafei said China was asking for funding on behalf of all developing countries.

The conference is set to continue this week with the arrival of heads of state from all over the world. US President Barack Obama is expected to attend the conference on Thursday.

As the conference proceeds, divisions over the issue of climate change are crystallising between the major trading blocks, reflecting the intensified struggle for the redivision of the world's economic resources. The issue of environmental protection is emerging as a stalking horse for the major imperialist nations, first and foremost the US, to advance their own financial and commercial interests.

It was partly the growing recognition of this fact that drew tens of thousands of young people to take part in Saturday's demonstrations in Copenhagen and other countries. The vicious reaction by the Danish police is a taste of things to come. The ruling elites represented at the Copenhagen conference are determined to criminalize all those who challenge their adherence to the capitalist market.



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