Mass arrests in Copenhagen

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Tens of thousands of demonstrators who assembled in Copenhagen on Saturday to peacefully demand serious measures by the United Nations Climate Conference (COP15) to address the global warming crisis were confronted by masses of riot police, who cordoned off a section of the march and arbitrarily arrested nearly 1,000 people.

The brutal measures employed by the Danish police represent a blatant violation of the democratic right to free assembly. They must serve as a warning to the working class and youth of Europe and internationally.

The march, which included many families with children, was broken up by heavily armed police squads who employed so-called "kettling" tactics to trap and detain groups of protesters. Demonstrators, mostly young people, were handcuffed and forced to sit on freezing pavements for several hours before being placed in cages.

One protester from Germany described his confinement: "You have a cold solid floor and four mesh walls and a mesh ceiling, and outside are cops walking around with dogs." Those arrested were made to sit "with our legs on either side of the people in front of us, leaning on the person behind us, with our hands still cuffed behind our backs. It was very painful for the person behind you and you were in pain from the person in front of you. It looks like Guantanamo when you see it."

The vast majority of those arrested were set free after their papers had been checked and their photos and personal information recorded by the police. On Monday, 13 of the nearly 1,000 demonstrators arrested Saturday remained in custody.

The mass arrests had been preceded by a number of selective detentions on Friday, when police arrested 68 members of the group "Our Climate—Not Your Business" on suspicion that they might commit illegal acts. The Danish police have been empowered to arrest people on the basis of unsubstantiated suspicions under a law rushed through the Danish parliament prior to the start of the Copenhagen conference.

On Sunday, police arrested a further 257 demonstrators after "kettling" a section of a march near the Osterport station. Those arrested were handcuffed and put onto buses which transported them to a detention centre.

The aggressive tactic of "kettling" and arresting protesters en masse is not new. It has been increasingly employed in recent demonstrations around the world—most notably in April this year, when British police cordoned off a group of demonstrators at the G20 summit in London. One bystander who was leaving work, Ian Tomlinson, died from internal bleeding after being truncheoned to the ground by a police officer.

However, Saturday marked the first time that such "zero tolerance" police tactics have been used against a mass demonstration on environmental issues.

The completely unprovoked police action was aimed at sending a clear signal as the COP15 summit entered its second week. This week, 110 heads of state will attend the conference.

The Danish authorities wanted to set an example: no protest will be tolerated in the vicinity of the conference centre. The proceedings inside the hall are not to be "disrupted" by the opinions of demonstrators reflecting the concerns of hundreds of millions of people across the globe, who are alarmed at the inability of world leaders to arrive at anything resembling a binding agreement to combat global warming.

The conference itself has become an object lesson on the impossibility within the framework of capitalism and the division of the world into rival nation states of developing rational and internationally coordinated policies to save the planet from the potentially

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disastrous consequences of growing carbon emissions.

It has provided a spectacle of the major imperialist powers, led by the US, seeking to impose the economic burden of any limitation on carbon emissions on the poor and historically oppressed countries.

The conference has further exposed the growing tensions between the major trading blocs—led by the US, the European Union and China. The ruling elites of these blocs and of individual nations are intent on using the issue of climate change to advance their own financial and strategic interests.

While the conference delegates from the assembled nation states are at loggerheads over measures to avert an environmental catastrophe, they are agreed that the full force of the state should be utilised against climate activists and ordinary citizens seeking to exercise their democratic right to assemble and protest.

The repression directed against protesters in Copenhagen is an expression of the growing offensive by the European bourgeoisie and capitalist governments all over the world against democratic and social rights.

In the post-war period, Western European countries such as Germany and the Scandinavian nations, including Denmark, presented themselves to the world as bastions of free speech and democracy. Amongst the Scandinavian countries are a number of the world's oldest bourgeois democracies.

The democracy of capitalist Europe was always limited and conditional. Whenever the ruling classes of Europe felt their basic interests threatened by challenges from the working class, they responded with police repression and victimization.

The past several decades—with the unravelling of the post-war boom, the intensification of economic crisis, and the growth of social inequality—have seen mounting attacks on democratic rights and a build-up of the police powers of the state.

Now, Europe is at war. In the face of broad public opposition, Germany, France and a number of Scandinavian nations have sent troops to Afghanistan to fight alongside the US. They are now considering how to increase their involvement. Only a week ago, Europe's elite gave President Barack Obama a platform at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony to propagate his message of unending war and neo-colonial conquest.

In 2006, the xenophobic and anti-Islamic campaign centred on the Muhammad cartoons published by a Danish newspaper received official support from leading political figures in the Danish government. Three years later, the anti-Islamic campaign in Europe has reached a new threshold, with the recent decision in Switzerland to ban minarets.

War, xenophobia and unceasing attacks on living conditions and social standards are incompatible with basic democratic rights. It is now necessary to add the crucial issue of climate protection to this list. In every case, the state has its own response when working people and ordinary citizens seek to express their differences with their respective governments—"zero tolerance" and state repression.

The only way to defend democratic rights and advance a progressive solution to the growing threat of global warming is the mobilisation of working people internationally to oppose the capitalist system on the basis of a socialist program.

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