

Police-state tactics against protesters in Britain

Robert Stevens
13 December 2010

The repression of students, lecturers, school pupils and others protesting against the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat government is the worst seen in decades.

Since the first protest of more than 50,000 students in London on November 10, ever larger squads of riot police have carried out increasingly violent assaults. Beatings and mass arrests of hundreds of students have taken place. These arrests have been made during and after demonstrations held in London and in towns and cities nationwide—many resulting from intelligence operations carried out by specialised units dedicated to counter-insurgency operations.

The level of police violence is on a scale not witnessed since the 1984-85 miners' strike. The latest onslaught, carried out against the "Day X 3" demonstration in London on December 9, was the most brutal yet. Some 2,800 police were mobilised against a demonstration numbering around 20,000 people.

A pre-planned attack was put into operation by the Metropolitan Police as a few thousand students entered Parliament Square to protest the rise in tuition fees being debated in Westminster. Most of the demonstrators had dispersed, as they were unable to get near Parliament due to the massive police presence. Those who had managed to get into Parliament Square were subject to a "kettling" operation, penned in by police for up to 10 hours. People were still being held on Westminster Bridge at 11:30 pm.

In total, 33 protesters were arrested and more than 50 seriously injured. Many more will not have reported their injuries for fear of retaliatory action. Dozens of reports, video footage and photographic evidence show students, including school children as young as 10, being attacked by heavily armed riot police.

Jody McIntyre, a disabled freelance journalist and blogger, was twice pulled out of his wheelchair and attacked by police with batons. Describing the first assault he said, "One policeman hit me with his baton on the

shoulder. Then suddenly, four or five of them picked me up and dragged me from my chair."

A 17-year-old female student told the BBC how she and her friends were attacked by police. "They didn't show any mercy whatsoever. They threw around my friends, who were just 17-year-old slim girls. They were beating my friends with batons."

She added, "I received a text later from a friend who didn't manage to escape, saying that he was thrown to the floor by the neck. He was beaten on the floor by three police officers until he was throwing up blood, and when that happened they just threw him aside and didn't give him any medical attention and went on to the next one."

License to employ this level of violence against protestors has been a goal of the police ever since the first anti-cuts demonstration was staged. The intention is to intimidate anyone that dares oppose the austerity measures being imposed in the interests of the banks and corporations.

Following the November 10 occupation of Millbank Towers, the site of Conservative Party HQ, the police complained that they had "lost control" because of restraints placed on them after the London G20 protests in April, 2009. The death at the hands of the police of Ian Tomlinson, a newspaper vendor, had evoked widespread criticism of kettling and police violence, leading to a promise of reform.

On Thursday's demonstration, thanks to the newly restored "gloves off" approach, another death at the hands of the Metropolitan Police very nearly occurred. Alfie Meadows, 20, a student at Middlesex University, was batoned by police before falling unconscious and being taken to hospital. Meadows suffered bleeding to the brain and underwent hours of surgery.

The police violence will only intensify. During the evening of December 9, a small group of protesters was allowed to come into close contact with a car carrying

Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla. A few anti-monarchy chants were sung, paint was thrown at the car and a window shattered before it drove away.

The government and media have demanded severe retribution. Hysterical calls to beef up policing have come thick and fast. Prime Minister David Cameron declared, “We want to make sure that the people who behaved in these appalling ways feel the full force of the law of the land.”

Conservative Party London Mayor Boris Johnson warned: “We could have a different system. We could have water cannon. We could have baton charges. We could have a different kind of democracy. We could have had very many more broken heads.”

Chillingly, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson said armed protection officers guarding the prince had shown “real restraint” in not opening fire. Security analyst and former police officer Charles Shoebridge said, “One can visualise a situation where police felt they had no alternative but to open fire. It wasn’t potentially dangerous. It was dangerous.”

The *London Evening Standard* took this as its cue, editorialising: “The question for police, politicians and the public will be whether tighter controls—and even the use of methods such as water cannon—might be needed...”

The Metropolitan Police announced Friday a major criminal investigation into the protests held during the last month. The BBC’s *Newsnight* programme revealed that one of the options now being considered for future demonstrations by the Metropolitan Police is indeed the use of water cannon.

Sir Hugh Orde, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, expressed concern over the political impact of the naked turn to repression. Asked by the *Guardian* “if there was a danger to the police’s reputation by repeated clashes at demonstrations,” Orde replied, “Yes, if it is allowed to be played as the cops acting as *an arm of the state*, delivering the elected government’s will, rather than protecting the rights of the citizen.” [Emphasis added].

The police needed to be seen as “operationally independent,” he added, in order to “rebut any allegations that we are doing what we are told by our political masters to advance a political agenda.”

Orde’s fears are well-founded. Millions are being given an object lesson: that the function of the police is to defend the interests of the ruling class against the mass of working people. They are not merely an arm of the state, but epitomise its essential character as a repressive

apparatus serving the ruling elite. In essence, the state, in the words of Frederick Engels, “consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc. at their command.”

The fact that the repressive and class character of the state now becomes increasingly overt, that the democratic niceties in which it is normally dressed up begin to fall away, is of great political significance. The resort to mass repression by an openly politicised police force is the product of acute class antagonisms. Governments everywhere, of whatever political colouration, are resorting to authoritarian methods in order to impose policies that are deeply unpopular and antithetical to the interests of the broad mass of the people.

The attacks on British students came just days after the Spanish social democratic government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero imposed a state of alert, during which striking air traffic controllers were forced back to work at gunpoint under military command. Scores of controllers now face prison under sedition charges.

Both the police and the military were used against protesting truck drivers in Greece and emergency military orders have been used twice against striking seamen by the social democratic PASOK government.

Riot police were employed against oil refinery workers in France.

These events pose urgent tasks before working people. The only alternative to a future of austerity, poverty and unemployment—imposed by means of brutal state repression—is the building of a mass political movement committed to the bringing down of these reactionary governments and their replacement with democratic workers’ governments pledged to socialist policies.

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