

UK education protests subjected to police attack

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Students and school pupils continued to protest nationwide in their thousands to oppose the government plans to raise tuition fees in England to £9,000 per year, the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance, and other education cuts. Once again, the police have responded with brutality and measures aimed at criminalising dissent.

Protests were held Tuesday in London and other towns and cities throughout the UK, including Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Cambridge, Liverpool, Newcastle, Bath, Belfast, Brighton, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Events were held in around 40 places nationwide, including many where student occupations of universities had already been under way since the previous protests.

As a result of the refusal of the National Union of Students and the trade unions to organise any action against the attacks on education, these and previous demonstrations have taken place largely as the result of small ad hoc groups and organisations. A feature of all the protests has been the absence of any trade union banners and the proliferation of homemade placards.

The protests on Tuesday were smaller than the national day of action that took place on November 24. While freezing weather conditions contributed to this, the movement suffers from being bereft of any political leadership seeking to link up opposition to cuts in education with the development of a mass movement against austerity aimed at bringing down the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

In London, hundreds of students gathered in Trafalgar Square and were met by a heavy police presence. In the previous police operations against student protest, “kettling” has been employed. Kettling is the police tactic in which they surround and pen in protesters in

small areas for hours on end. In what amounts to the forced imprisonment of demonstrators, they are denied access to food, drink or toilet facilities and have no recourse to due legal process.

In an attempt to avoid the police kettling protesters again, sections of the London march dispersed in various directions, with the police giving chase. One of the organisers of the demonstration, the National Campaign against Fees and Cuts, said that the police had “pre-emptively blocked” the protest route.

The *Daily Mail* reported, “Hundreds of demonstrators also ran from officers in Whitehall over fears they would be ‘kettled’ just yards from the start of a planned march, while splinter groups were tracked by police around the West End adding to traffic chaos sparked by the Arctic conditions. Thousands also scattered through London’s West End after they were confronted by massed ranks of police, apparently fearing they would be penned in, in the freezing weather.”

Gold, a freelance journalist, wrote in the *Guardian* that she was amongst a group of students who had run down “Piccadilly Circus and into Regent Street, then Oxford Street”, before “breaking again into a run down to the Embankment”.

Police used violence indiscriminately against protesters. Gold described how she saw police brutality against a school child, stating she witnessed “a policeman punch a boy out of the way, entirely without provocation”.

According to the BBC, three people were hurt in London. These assaults followed the ominous comments of Metropolitan Police Commander Bob Broadhurst, who stated ahead of the protest, “Schoolchildren have as much right as anyone else to protest, but young people are more vulnerable and

likely to be injured if violence breaks out”, adding, “there is only so much police officers can do once they are in a crowd of thousands.”

A measure of the increasing state violence being mobilised against the student demonstrators was the arrest total of 153 people. There were more arrests on Tuesday than on the previous larger demonstrations. Of these, 139 were arrested for supposed breach of the peace, after police claimed that a group of up to 200 in Trafalgar Square had “refused to disperse”.

A report on the Indymedia web site stated that following the mass arrest of about 100 people who had previously been “kettled”, “About 20 people are still left in the kettle. Police are handcuffing protesters as they are coming out. Police let a few young people out but it seems are arresting everyone else.”

An update on Indymedia as the arrests were being made stated that the police were “citing Section 3 of Criminal Law Act as reasoning for kettle—these give police powers to use force in order to prevent crime or make arrests.”

Some of those arrested were later released, but only after being forced to give their details, some on camera, to police Forward Intelligence Teams (FIT). FIT is now used routinely by the police to gather information on protesters as part of a massive network of state spying.

A heavy police presence was also utilised against other demonstrations taking place. In Manchester and Leeds, hundreds of police officers surrounded protesters as they gathered and as they marched.

On the demonstration in Manchester, which began at the main university and proceeded to the city centre, protesters were met by a large unit of police including mounted police and more than a dozen police vans. Police “Evidence Gathering” teams also filmed participants in the demonstration, some of whom were as young as 13 years of age. At several points during the demonstration, police snatch squads entered the crowd and grabbed protesters. Five people were arrested.

In Sheffield, several hundred people demonstrated near to the constituency office of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Protesters were unable to demonstrate outside the office, as the police had erected barriers about 30 metres away from the entrance, guarding it with 30 officers.

In Bristol, several thousand students from the city’s

two universities demonstrated, with police arresting 10 people.

Protesters were photographed by police as they re-entered the student-occupied Michael Sadler building at the University of Leeds.

While the protests do not as yet assume a mass character, there is increasing concern within ruling circles, including high-ranking police officers, that they are not led by any organisations trusted to keep them under control.

Airing these dangers, Chief Inspector Mark Jackson, from Avon and Somerset Police, commented on the protest in Bristol, “As with before, there is an element of people who are there for alternative motives who have had a greater influence over the protest today, which has caused more disruption and has detracted more from the cause of genuine students.”

The *Daily Mail* stated that “Jackson called for someone from the student body to come forward so they could better co-ordinate what he referred to as a ‘leaderless protest’.”

“He said they were more than willing to engage with the students to better organise the protests so their message was not lost and to stop the protests ‘degenerating into chaos’ due to people who had no interest in student fees.”

This call follows the move by National Union of Students President Aaron Porter, who ahead of Tuesday’s protests was forced to apologise for his “spineless” lack of public support for the protests. Porter also admitted that he did not attend the November 24 protest in London due to the fact that he was ensconced in talks with high-ranking trade union leaders.

The comments of Chief Inspector Mark Jackson are representative of the ruling elite who fear that a “leaderless protest” movement by young people and students against austerity may take on a politically independent character, out of the straitjacket imposed by the NUS and the trade unions.



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