

Britain: Bristol riots provoked by police

Our reporters
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Thursday's night of violent confrontations with the police in Bristol's Stokes Croft area was triggered by the attempted forced eviction of a small, long-standing squat, revealing profound political resentments. In the course of the confrontations, the police sent in around 160 riot police, including officers from three neighbouring forces.

Coming on top of police brutality meted out against students protesting increased tuition fees, the events in Bristol are intended to send a clear message that any form of protest or dissent is to be criminalised.

Two factors came together for the police. One was the long-established squat, known in the area as Telepathic Heights. The coalition government has signalled its intention to clamp down on squatting, under conditions where there is an absence of social housing and private rents are rising.

The other factor was the locally unpopular Tesco Express store on Cheltenham Road, which has been the subject of protests since it was proposed two years ago. Local campaigners claimed a 96 percent opposition to the store during the planning consultation process, with accusations that Bristol City Council had already agreed to a change of use for the building before they even consulted local residents. The building had been squatted by protestors opposing the development of the store. Since its opening last week there have been further protests.

The police have claimed the Telepathic Heights squat was directly connected with attempts to attack the store. Squatters deny any connection with the anti-Tesco campaign.

On Wednesday night, bailiffs went to Telepathic Heights to clear the squat. The council has recently compulsorily purchased the building due to its poor condition. The bailiffs abandoned these plans because

of the number of people in the building. Squatters have since told the *Guardian* that most of the occupants had then moved out, having contacted the council's empty homes agency and removed their belongings. Council spokesman Peter Holt said the council had not even applied for a court eviction order because the squatters had already agreed to move out when spoken to by staff.

On Thursday night at around 6:30 p.m. around "30 to 40 police officers all dressed up in riot gear...stormed the building", according to squatter Gavin Houghton. Other officers in riot gear were patrolling the area from about 7 p.m., according to eyewitnesses. The police claimed that the squat posed "a real threat to the local community". Houghton denies any link between the squat and the anti-Tesco protests.

The police justified their actions on the basis of local reports that petrol bombs were being manufactured in the squat for use against Tesco. The supermarket's security officers allege that an individual entered the store, threatened to firebomb it, and then fled into the squat. Local police officers claim to have seen people waving Molotov cocktails, but no evidence of this has yet been offered. Police claim to have found petrol bombs and "possible petrol bombs" on the roof of the squat, and say they are examining these. One local told the *World Socialist Web Site* that as the squat had no electricity supply, some petrol would have been used on-site for power. The squat is reportedly still occupied.

The residential area hosts many bars, clubs, and cafes. It was busy with workers returning home and people going out for the evening before the bank holiday. The police sealed off the whole of Stokes Croft to create a "sterile area", and called in back-up, reportedly declaring that a "terrorist situation" had developed. Access and exit were barred to residents and visitors alike. Residents who came out to find out what was

going on often found themselves on the wrong side of a police cordon and were prevented from returning home.

A crowd was gathering to watch the eviction when officers closed off Cheltenham Road. Riot police with horses were deployed and charged the crowd. Protestors started throwing bottles and stones. More people arrived, drawn by the police helicopter spotlight. This situation developed into running battles as the police forced the crowds up and down Stokes Croft's streets. The conflicts ran on into the early morning, and residents endured continual presence of a low-flying police helicopter throughout the night.

All descriptions of the police tactics point to the maximum provocative disruption.

Eyewitnesses described being "kettled" (forcibly detained on the street) in Ashley Road as a trigger for violence. At one point, officers forced protestors into an adjacent council estate, where residents hurled rubbish at the police.

A police vehicle was abandoned outside the Tesco store. It became a "target of frustration", in the words of one witness, and was attacked at 2 a.m. Many residents told us they thought abandoning this vehicle was a deliberate ploy to provoke an attack, which could be used to justify the later intensification of police operations in the area.

During the student protests last November in London, a riot van was similarly and inexplicably left by police in the middle of a crowd of protestors. Pictures of demonstrators jumping on the van and spraying paint on it, were then used to legitimise an escalation of violence against the protestors.

During the disturbances in Bristol, the Tesco store was attacked and its frontage smashed. The press reported that it had been petrol-bombed, but there is no evidence for this. Local residents have angrily rejected the suggestion, and there have been complaints that this report was allowed to stand uncorrected on international media sites for 24 hours.

The police charged into the crowds watching the squat being evicted, which included patrons of local bars and restaurants. Jessie Webb, a barman, told the *Independent*, "The police caused [the riot]. They turned up in large numbers, and it attracted a crowd. Then they charged into them".

A local waitress emphasised to the *World Socialist Web Site* "the horror" of being attacked by the police

after a quiet night out.

Eyewitnesses told the WSWS of unprovoked attacks on passersby. People were suddenly put in headlocks, battered with batons, and dispersed by a riot van. Eyewitnesses described police threats to beat them about the head if they did not move on.

Local Labour MP Kerry McCarthy told the *Guardian* she had seen a police officer assaulting a photographer. A local Labour councillor was truncheoned by police. McCarthy also questioned why the raid took place at night in an area full of bars.

McCarthy's sympathies are with the corporations and businesses. She said that the chief constable told her about the reported petrol bombs. This, she said, was an "anti-establishment protest: against capitalism and corporations, similar to what we saw in the march against the cuts in London where Starbucks and banks were targeted".



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