

UK: Police make brutal attack on Irish traveller camp

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The eviction of an Irish traveller encampment at Dale Farm in southeast England began on Wednesday morning. Police led an operation to remove those that remained on the site after the high court ruled on Tuesday that plans by the Conservative-run Basildon council to forcibly evict the residents was “proportionate,” ending a 10-year legal battle.

The operation began at dawn, with armed police units storming the rear entrance to Dale Farm at 7:00 a.m. The decision to allow the police to lead the operation was taken after the council claimed to have obtained “intelligence” that the residents and their supporters were preparing violent attacks against any officials entering the area.

In the event, notwithstanding some scuffles as travellers and protesters threw bottles and other objects at officers, it was the police who were responsible for meting out severe violence. Several people were tasered, and at least three were hospitalised as a result of baton attacks. It is the first time tasers have been used for “crowd control” in Britain.

A *Guardian* blog post by the Dale Farm Solidarity group described the day’s events:

“Today’s operation has been harrowing for all the families and supporters involved. We have seen the police enter the site by smashing through a legal plot that was assumed to be safe by elderly residents seeking refuge. As police sledge hammered a wall on this plot, these elderly residents were seriously injured. A Dale Farm mother is in hospital and can’t move her legs after being beaten by police; tasers have been used despite being declared inappropriate for public order situations; and seven people have been taken away in ambulances.”

Residents denounced police for their excessive force and targeting of women and children. Margaret

Sheridan, a mother who brought the court action that temporarily halted the eviction last month, said, “They promised a peaceful eviction, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t peaceful at all. They [the police] were pushing things out of the way. When the boy was tasered, he was hopping—it was like an electric shock. I didn’t think the police could use tasers, it was terrifying.”

Some vulnerable elderly residents, who relied on machinery and medication, found their lives at risk when the police cut electricity supplies to the camp early on. An elderly man, who had demanded to be allowed to die on his plot where his home sat, was stretchered away by police.

Those resisting the eviction responded to the police intervention by setting fire to barricades, including a caravan. Many chained themselves to a 12-metre-high fortified gate at the entrance to the site, which was only removed on Thursday.

Tony Ball, head of Basildon Council, blamed the travellers themselves for their predicament, claiming that “alternative bricks and mortar accommodation” had been offered but not accepted.

In reality, Basildon Council has made clear its refusal to permit travellers to set up camps in the area. Last month, Ball asserted that the council would “absolutely not” offer alternative sites for camps to be set up by those losing their homes as a result of the eviction. As Mary Sheridan remarked, “People are saying that we have other places to go. But if I had anywhere else to go do you think I’d be putting my children through this? We don’t want mansions, we don’t want a flat, all we want is a little piece of land where we can park our caravans so we can school our children and look after our elderly. Is that so hard?”

The eviction will seriously impact the community’s children, who will find it increasingly hard to receive

an education. Residents explained how it would also affect their ability to get health care, as they would no longer have permanent addresses.

Cathleen McCarthy pointed to the broader political implications: “The memory of Dale Farm will weigh heavily on Britain for generations. We are being dragged out of the only homes we have in this world. Our entire community is being ripped apart by Basildon Council and the politicians in government.”

As the police operation continued, estimates of the cost of the eviction rose to more than £20 million.

The determination of the council to enforce the eviction despite such a high price points to its broader political significance. The move had the full backing of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government. The government’s support for the eviction emerges out of a broader agenda of promoting xenophobia and vicious attacks on immigrant and ethnic minority populations. The entire traveller community is being targeted in the so-called “localism” bill, which will remove obligations on local councils to provide sites for them to stay on, as well as dramatically toughening planning regulations for their homes.

Another reason lies in the growing powers being handed to the police. Barely two months after riots hit inner-city communities across England, and with threats of social unrest mounting due to worsening economic conditions, ruling circles are intent on making an example of the travellers to show that dissent in whatever form will not be tolerated. The measures directed against those at Dale Farm were being trialled for use on a wider scale.



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