

“Total Policing” and the criminalisation of dissent

Chris Marsden
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The scale of the police operation mounted Wednesday against a relatively small and entirely peaceful protest against UK education cuts shows that the ruling elite is no longer prepared to tolerate any form of political and social opposition.

If one accepts the police estimate of the size of the protest, the deployment of 4,000 officers, many in full riot gear, represents a police officer to protester ratio of one-to-one. If a more accurate figure of 8,000 is accepted, then the ratio is still one-to-two.

New Metropolitan Police Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe described the protest as a test of his policy of “Total Policing.” This is what it looked like: London was placed on virtual lock-down, with all major roads along the march’s route blocked off by ranks of police, riot vans, mounted officers and ten-foot-high barricades.

Marchers were met at the rail, underground and coach stations and handed an 11-page brochure, with the capitalised title “TOTAL POLICING” on the front and back. It warned that police would use section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 to search people and enforce the removal of masks.

The march was dragooned by ranks of police at the front, back and both sides along the three-mile route. Helicopters circled overhead, making extensive videos of those taking part.

In a further provocation, the march was stopped every ten metres, meaning that a three-mile route took three hours to walk. This periodic kettling enabled the police to go into the crowd at certain points, pushing and barging people in the hope of provoking a reaction.

A statement issued on the day warned that the planned rally at the London Wall had to end in less than an hour and the area had to be completely cleared in two hours. An attempt to set up a tent camp in

Trafalgar Square, in solidarity with the Occupy protest at St Paul’s Cathedral, was cleared in minutes as police dragged away those involved.

The effort by a group of electricians—striking against management threats to cut their wages by up to 35 percent—to join up with the student protest was similarly met with police violence. The electricians’ march was encircled so they were virtually imprisoned. When some tried to break away, riot police waded in with batons and knocked workers to the ground. Police were reportedly armed with stun grenades. Names and addresses were taken under the authority of Section 60 of the Public Order Act.

Before the march, the commander in charge, Simon Pountain, told a press conference that the use of water cannon was not planned, but plastic bullets had been authorised—the first time ever in England.

Over 450 letters were sent out warning anyone arrested in connection with previous public order offences that a repeat offence would lead to arrest and trial “at the earliest opportunity.” Many of these letters were sent to people with no previous convictions, pointing to the existence of a police database of those whose sole “crime” was to have engaged in a previous protest.

In an article reprinted in the *Police Oracle*, the *Guardian*’s crime correspondent blithely described the pre-authorisation of baton rounds and the sending of threatening letters as nothing new. “What is new,” she said, was the decision by Pountain to make this public.

Authorisation for baton rounds was given during the summer rioting in Britain’s cities, she said, and “perhaps less well known... they were also authorised for use during the student demonstration against cuts a year ago.”

The police are also to be given additional powers, she

noted, by Home Secretary Theresa May, whereby a “police superintendent will be able to clear the public out of a specific area during a demonstration—a power not available since the Riot Act was removed from the statute book in 1973.”

Last October’s student protest saw over 150 arrests, both during and after the event. This summer’s riots—provoked by the police killing of an unarmed man—were followed by over 4,000 arrests and over 2,000 prosecutions, with long custodial sentences handed out for the most trivial offences.

A similar picture is repeated internationally. Wherever workers and young people seek to protest the imposition of savage austerity cuts, they are met with brutal repression.

In Greece, for example, the October 20 general strike protest was attacked by 15,000 riot police and Syntagma Square was flooded with tear gas. In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street protests spread nationally after two weeks in large measure in response to the October 1 arrest of 700 protesters—almost one-third—of those demonstrating on the Brooklyn Bridge. Since then, various local police forces have mounted attacks using riot gear, tear gas and other weapons, bringing the national total of those arrested to over 3,000.

The resort to repressive measures is a measure of the extreme polarisation between the classes.

In Britain, the Riot Act now being cited was originally drafted in 1714, making rioting punishable by death. This was reduced to transportation for life in 1837.

Its most famous usage was in the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, in Manchester, when a cavalry charge against 80,000 protesters demanding parliamentary reform and relief from crushing economic hardship killed 15 and injured 700.

In Glasgow, on Black Friday 1919, riot police and 10,000 troops were despatched against workers campaigning for shorter work hours. Black Friday took place in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, at a time when Britain’s elite feared a “Bolshevist uprising.” The fact that similar powers are being enacted today, first covertly and now amid official fanfare, should be a warning to the working class in Britain, Europe and internationally.

Today, a fabulously wealthy oligarchy dictates all

aspects of social life in pursuit of ever-greater personal enrichment. Under conditions of worsening economic crisis, this translates into demands for cuts and austerity for millions, for which there is no possibility of securing a democratic mandate.

This determines the moves by bourgeois governments around the world to enact measures characteristic of a police state and, in Greece, the threat of a military coup.

The response of workers and young people must be the building of a mass socialist movement and the adoption of a revolutionary perspective for a truly democratic and egalitarian society, based on the expropriation of the oligarchy and the organization of production to meet the social rights of all to education, health care, housing and a well-paid job.

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