

Mass arrests at Eric Garner protest in London

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Seventy-six protesters were arrested at the end of a protest in London last Wednesday against the police killing of Eric Garner in New York and the grand jury decision to acquit the officer.

Around 1,000 mainly young people were involved in the demonstration at the Westfield shopping centre in west London under the slogan “We Can’t Breathe”—a reference to Garner’s last words. Those arrested were taken to different police stations around the capital and charged with “violent disorder”, a serious offence that could result in up to five years imprisonment.

The demonstration was organised by a number of groups including the London Black Revolutionaries, the National Union of Students Black Students’ Campaign, London Campaign Against Police and State Violence, and Black Activists Rising Against the Cuts. They called for people to take part in a “non-violent die-in” to protest at the grand jury’s “despicable verdicts” and “the lack of consequences for Eric Garner’s murderer, as well as against the institutionalised racism of police in both the US and the UK, and the continued murders of black people that go unpunished.”

Before the demonstration the organisers declared: “In the UK, one person a week dies in police custody, or following police contact. Mark Duggan, Jimmy Mubenga, Stephen Lawrence and Smiley Culture are just some of those failed by our so-called ‘justice’ system; it’s time for it to stop.”

Designer and author “Sharpeye” told the WSWs why he went to the demonstration and what he witnessed. “I wouldn’t say I am political, I’m not a revolutionary, but I am for equal rights and against injustice. I’ve been reading more and becoming more involved. I have a mixed race son and have had a lot of altercations with the police. I was also there to take some photographs”, he said.

Sharpeye explained that the protest was held at Westfield because the media had ignored the demonstrations outside the American Embassy, “an empty building in the back streets with no one there”.

Sharpeye continued, “We were told to meet up inside Westfield. Then we went outside to listen to the speeches. Afterwards, some of the protesters tried to get back inside and there was some pushing on the doors to the shopping centre which had been closed. There was some banging on windows and some people got carried away but nothing I’d called violent.

“Then suddenly the security guards opened the doors and let everyone back in again. The police did not intervene at that stage. But once people were inside the police kettled [surrounded] them at different places. The organisers were all together and some of them are the ones the police got.

“There were about a thousand there, so 76 arrested is a big percentage. I was taken to Wandsworth [police station] and they kept me in until midday on Thursday. Then they let us go. It was a show of power. They are going to check the CCTV. But I don’t think they will nick anyone. There wasn’t enough violence there. I thought it was pretty peaceful. It was a good protest because it got the PR.”

Teenager L. was not confident about the charges being dropped. She has been advised not to say anything about the circumstances of her arrest.

“I can’t say much because I have been charged. Everyone was in a good mood, waving home-made banners and shouting slogans. We had the die-in and the speeches. Then a lot went back into the shopping centre. It was quite rowdy (see video) but I wouldn’t call it a raging mob storming the shops like they said in the news.

“The main thing was people got angrier after the

police kettled us and wouldn't let us leave. Kettling is a good word because it makes people boil. I think the police wanted to provoke something. They had a lot of police vans and even some double decker buses lined up even before the protest started. Maybe we fell into a trap.

"Then the police began arresting people including me. We weren't doing anything aggressive. I didn't see any violence. I think the police knew who the organisers were and were determined to take them in. And now they are going to make an example of us.

"I'm really worried about the violent disorder charge. It's not a laughing matter. I've read up about it. It was brought in in the 1980s when there were a lot of strikes and so was a political law from the beginning. It was brought in to make it easier to get a conviction. The police don't have to get witnesses to say they were frightened by the demo. They just have to establish that any hypothetical normal person would be.

"They charged the students who were protesting against fees going up in 2010 but a jury found them not guilty. However, it took over two years before they finally cleared their names. Last week, some English Defence League supporters were jailed for up to two years for a protest that did turn violent, with rocks and bottles thrown and 30 police were injured. There was nothing like that at Westfield. Only one security guy was hurt according to the police. Maybe they won't press the charges but we won't know for months. On the other hand, I think they will do all they can to make an example of us, to show everyone who's in charge", L. concluded.

The mass arrests at the Westfield demonstration are another example of the nervousness of the ruling elite in the face of any form of dissent. Since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 it has used the force of the state ever more harshly against young people in an attempt to stamp out opposition to austerity and the growth of social inequality.

Huge student protests in 2010 were met with police horse charges. In 2011, following riots in London and other cities, many youth were put before kangaroo courts dispensing summary justice. In the week before the Westfield protest, unprecedented state violence, involving the spraying of CS gas was used to break up a peaceful sit-in at the University of Warwick protesting against tuition fees.



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