

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio defends mass arrests of demonstrators

Evan Blake
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Over 140 people were arrested in New York City on Wednesday evening, as part of a police crackdown on demonstrations in solidarity with protests in Baltimore, Maryland over the police murder of Freddie Gray.

On Thursday, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio expressed unequivocal support for the mass arrests, declaring, “We won’t tolerate illegality. We won’t tolerate disorder.”

“When the police give you an instruction, you follow the instruction—it’s not debatable,” he said.

Wednesday’s crackdown began when police arrested over a dozen protesters around Union Square, for allegedly attempting to block the street. Simultaneously, police with batons violently pushed the crowd back onto the sidewalk.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) handed out fliers that threatened to arrest “groups of pedestrians” found blocking sidewalks and streets. Using this warning as justification, police proceeded to arrest protesters in groups periodically throughout the evening, with reports of many being thrown to the ground violently prior to being handcuffed.

Marie Lewis, 28, told the *New York Times* that “At one point, they blocked off both sides of our march, and we thought they were going to arrest all of us.”

The demonstration, called in solidarity with demonstrations taking place in Baltimore against the police murder of 25-year-old Freddie Gray, follows large protests last year over the police murder of Eric Garner and subsequent failure to bring charges against his killer, officer Daniel Pantaleo.

Demonstrators chanted “Freddie Gray, Michael Brown. Shut it down, shut it down,” with one protester’s sign reading “Baltimore is everywhere.” From Union Square, protesters marched to nearby Holland Tunnel, where police blockaded the entrance to

the tunnel and arrested dozens attempting to enter the busy underpass.

On Thursday, Police Commissioner William Bratton, who was appointed by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, warned that the NYPD is going “to be more assertive” in responding to demonstrations. “We will be much faster to make arrests if in fact they attempt to intend to move” toward roads or bridges, Bratton said.

At a press conference Wednesday prior to the police crackdown, de Blasio declared that “Anyone who means to do violence, anyone who means to assault police officers or assault property should be isolated from the rest, and the protesters should work with the police to deal with them.”

De Blasio had campaigned in the 2013 election as a police reformer, and last year made comments vaguely sympathetic to the demonstrations. But following the December 20 killing of two police officers by a mentally unstable man, which Bratton falsely portrayed as a “direct spinoff of this issue of these demonstrations,” de Blasio dropped his pretensions of sympathy for the victims of police violence.

In rapid succession, de Blasio called for an end to protests against police violence, green-lighted the formation of a 350-member paramilitary police unit specializing in “disorder control,” vowed that he would veto City Council legislation intended to make the use of chokeholds by the police illegal, and fully backed a \$7.3 million addition to the city’s budget for 13,000 new bulletproof vests for the city’s cops.

Demonstrations continued Thursday in Baltimore and other cities. Over a thousand people protested in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on Thursday evening. Beginning at roughly 7:45pm, police began carrying out arrests. Prior to the crackdown, protesters had been marching peacefully for the previous three hours.

Demonstrators then marched to a nearby federal prison building, where they chanted, “You are not alone,” referring to the protests in Baltimore.

In March, the US Justice Department released a report revealing that over the past eight years, Philadelphia Police Department officers were involved in 394 shootings, amounting to about one per week.



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