

Police intimidation and violence used against UK fracking protestors

Dennis Moore
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Lancashire police in north west England have revealed that they have been passing on the details of disabled anti-fracking protestors who are claiming benefits to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

Planning permission for the shale gas company Cuadrilla to drill at the Preston New Road site near Blackpool had initially been refused by Lancashire County Council. It was later approved by the secretary of state on appeal, allowing work to go ahead in October 2016.

Police have defended their actions, claiming that they have a duty to alert the DWP if officers receive information that clearly suggests fraud maybe being committed. In a statement the police said, “The DWP are a partner agency and where we have information to suggest that fraud may be being committed we have a duty to pass that on, including video footage if we have it. They are the appropriate agency and it is their decision what, if any, action should be taken.”

The *Independent* newspaper reported that at least two activists who attended anti-fracking protests at the Preston New Road site Blackpool had to attend interviews with the DWP. Both were questioned as to the validity of their claim to disability benefits.

One of the protestors, Neil Sheldrick, who has a spinal disability, told the newspaper that this had “all got on top of me... It is making me feel very low. I’m being targeted for something I believe in.”

Neil used to work in the Merchant Navy and was injured while working on a ship. He received a lifetime award of industrial injuries disablement benefit. Two months after starting to protest at the Preston New Road site, he was called in to be interviewed by the DWP.

Neil said that his own GP could not understand why

he had been sent in for a reassessment of his benefits. “The doctor wrote on his notes that I shouldn’t need to be assessed again because spinal cord injuries do not repair themselves.”

Another protestor at the site, a disabled woman, who has a fluctuating condition, had her benefit claim suspended and her Motability car removed. Motability cars are provided via the disabled person’s benefit, enabling that person to get around and maintain independence.

She had been stopped by a police officer while driving to a protest. The officer had said to her that they were “duty bound to tell Motability that you’re using your car for illegal purposes.”

She was later interviewed by the DWP under caution and was ordered to pay back £6,000. Her file has been sent to the Crown Prosecution Service.

When the DWP interviewed the woman, she was asked about footage that showed her walking a few steps forward and then a few steps back, and about being seen leaning on a bicycle as she walked up a hill. “What they were saying was absolute rubbish. Where are the photos of me falling over, me sleeping for 12 to 16 hours?”

“The police and DWP are trying to curtail people’s human rights by trying to stop them protesting. They are making me worry every time I go out to somewhere like that that it is going to cost me my ability to pay my rent, because they are going to say, ‘If you are able to stand at the gates, you should be able to do a full year’s work’.”

The Network for Police Monitoring (Netpol) published a report, in November 2017, “Protecting the Planet is not a Crime.” It examined the tactics the police have used against anti-fracking protestors and focusses in large part on the protests in Lancashire.

The report highlights how large numbers of officers have been using aggressive and confrontational tactics, most notably in Lancashire and North Yorkshire, intent on making it as difficult as possible for residents to effectively protest.

Netpol saw evidence that the police had knocked campaigners unconscious, pushed people into hedges, and violently dragged older people across the road, shoving others into speeding traffic.

There was evidence that there had been force used against disabled protestors, including pushing people out of wheelchairs and officers using painful pressure point restraint techniques.

Neil Sheldrick was injured after being told to move by a police officer to allow a lorry to leave the site. A police officer pinned him down after bringing his knee down onto Sheldrick's thigh with force. He only released the restraint when Sheldrick screamed out.

Sheldrick has consistently protested peacefully at the site while sat in his wheelchair holding a placard and never tried to obstruct lorries entering or leaving the site.

There have been accusations by campaigners that the police have also ignored violent and unlawful actions carried out by private security firms employed by Cuadrilla.

These protests have involved many who live in rural communities taking part in demonstrations for the first time, with little experience of how the police behave. The report points to the escalation in confrontational tactics adopted by the police, spurred on by supporters of the shale gas industry mainly carried out through the pages of the *Times*, calling on the courts and police to deal with anti-fracking protestors more robustly.

On March 11, the *Times* reported that "after complaints to the Home Office by local pro-business leaders, Lancashire Police are taking a tougher line with local protestors, some of whom are anti-capitalist activists."

The *Times* published unsubstantiated serious allegations on March 21 that "anti- fracking protestors have adopted the tactics of animal rights extremists by targeting employees and supporters of shale gas companies."

The report highlights the role of the GMB trade union, who gave a press release calling for "a crackdown on fracking activists."

Union News reported the GMB's position extensively in an article, "GMB calls for crackdown on anti-fracking activists."

It explained that "The GMB has joined with the business community in calling for the rights of those working in the emerging shale gas industry to be protected whilst respecting the rights to peaceful protest.

"The GMB, along with the Chamber of Commerce, has written to political leaders asking them to make sure police and judiciary take a firm line with protestors that target shale gas suppliers."

"The targeting of supply chain companies like this is reminiscent of tactics used by animal rights extremists," Union News declared, citing approvingly GMB national officer Stuart Fegan declaring that "protestors should not be allowed to prevent workers from getting to and from their jobs just because they disagree that the workers employer has decided to legally explore the opportunities that the new onshore shale gas industry brings," as well as a statement by chief executive of the North and Western Lancashire Chamber of Commerce Babs Murphy complaining of businesses' "fearing that they will be targeted with some sort of retaliation, be that physical blockades by protestors or reputationally damaging and distressing comments posted on social media."

The Community Union supports the GMB's position.

This makes clear that the protection of the financial interests of the shale gas companies is considered paramount for the union bureaucracy, which is actively hostile to the concerns raised by protestors genuinely worried about the impact of fracking on the environment.



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