

UK police seek to prosecute 1,130 Extinction Rebellion climate change protestors

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The London Metropolitan Police are pushing to prosecute every single one of the 1,130 protestors arrested during climate change demonstrations organised by Extinction Rebellion (XR) in April.

In the face of a massive police operation to intimidate and disperse them, protestors had peacefully occupied prominent public spaces across London, including Parliament Square, Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Bridge, Oxford Circus and Marble Arch.

Hundreds of extra police officers from neighbouring forces were drafted into the city, with the heavy police presence at times outnumbering the demonstrators. At the height of the protests, Met Police Commissioner Cressida Dick declared, “Every day we have had over 1,000 officers—and now over 1,500 officers.”

In fact, a staggering 10,000 police officers were deployed over the two weeks of protests.

Many videos were circulated on social media showing police officers forcibly removing peaceful protestors and dragging them through the streets by their wrists. But despite police surrounding their targets, sticking video cameras in their faces and dragging them to police vans, there was no violence from the demonstrators.

According to Deputy Assistant Commissioner Laurence Taylor, more than 70 XR protestors have already been charged with various offences, including breach of a Section 14 Notice of the Public Order Act 1986, for obstructing a highway and police.

A dedicated unit of around 30 police officers has been set up to investigate the alleged “offences” committed by the demonstrators during the XR protests, Taylor told journalists at Scotland Yard. “It is our anticipation that we are putting all of those to the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] for decisions,” he continued.

The mass arrests at the XR protests constitute the

largest act of state repression against peaceful protests for at least 37 years. The number of arrests far surpassed that at the anti-nuclear protests at RAF Upper Heyford in 1982, where 752 were detained, and at the poll tax riots in 1990, where 339 were arrested.

The arrests of over 1,000 came amidst vitriolic denunciations from politicians and the bourgeois media of the XR demonstrations and calls for stepped-up police repression.

“No one should be allowed to break the law without consequence,” Conservative Home Secretary and now leadership contender Sajid Javid tweeted during the protests. He called on police to “take a firm stance” against “any protestors who are stepping outside the boundaries of the law” and “significantly disrupting the lives of others.”

In April, former Labour Home Secretary, now Sir David Blunkett, also wrote an opinion piece in the right-wing *Daily Mail* demanding: “Why hasn’t the full force of the law been used against these eco-anarchists who fill me with contempt?”

Sky News presenter Adam Boulton attacked protestors for “fascistic disruption” in a clear attempt to redefine and criminalise the right to protest.

Speaking about the moves to prosecute all the detained protestors, deputy assistant commissioner Taylor called for stronger punishment for protestors who apparently commit “unlawful” activities.

“I’m not saying going to jail,” Taylor said, “but we would like to see consequences for any activity at these events that is unlawful.”

“Protest is not illegal. There is nothing unlawful about protest,” he conceded grudgingly. “[But the] activity of some individuals at a protest can be unlawful... [At] the moment there doesn’t seem to be much of a criminal deterrent for doing that and

therefore, it doesn't legitimise it but it does make it easy for that unlawful activity to take place.

"And what we would like to see is consequence, where the law is clearly broken and it goes beyond what is reasonable and a legitimate aim for a protest, for that to be recognised and for appropriate sanctions [to be imposed]."

Precisely what constitutes a "reasonable and... legitimate aim for a protest" in Taylor's book is left unsaid.

In keeping with the demands from journalists and politicians, the Met Police are calling for the effective criminalisation of protest. This was made doubly clear back in April by Metropolitan Police Commander Adrian Usher, who called on the government to change "outdated" protest laws to criminalise even peaceful demonstrations.

"We need to move away from the language of 'peaceful protest' to talk about 'lawful protest,'" Usher told the Human Rights Committee in parliament.

"A protest being peaceful is only one of the attributes police would assign to a protest to make it lawful," he continued. "We will conduct a sober review of our tactics against recent protest but I think it's likely to say the legislation associated with policing protest is quite dated.

"Policing and protest has moved on and legislation should follow suit," Usher added.

The calls by police, politicians and the media to criminalise demonstrations are a massive upscaling in attacking democratic rights.

What is being prepared are police state conditions, whereby any demonstration, no matter whether violence has been used by protestors, can be declared "unlawful" by an arbitrary decision of the police, leading to legal charges against anyone who opposes the government's policy.

Usher's demands that protest laws be changed ostensibly come in response to verbal "abuse" of MPs such as Tory Anna Soubry, who was verbally confronted by right-wing pro-Brexit protestors outside parliament earlier this year.

But while the targets of calls for police repression have so far been isolated protestors outside parliament, and the largely middle class XR demonstrations, the real purpose of this stepped-up authoritarianism is to combat unrest from an increasingly restive working

class.

The statements by the Met police are only a foretaste of how the state will respond to any large-scale movement of workers. The arguments being deployed to justify police repression against environmental protestors—including "disruption" and "inconvenience" to the public—will be used tomorrow to demand mass arrests and repression against striking railway workers, bus drivers, pilots and cabin crew, or National Health Service staff.



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