

UK: Far-right rampage in central Manchester, as police stand aside

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On Saturday, more than 100 supporters of UK fascist Tommy Robinson marched through Manchester city centre, holding an unprecedented demonstration inside the privately-owned Arndale shopping centre.

Afterwards, the mob rampaged through a nearby public square, smashing up the stall of a left-wing organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG).

Marchers draped in English flags chanted in support of Robinson, who was jailed for contempt of court on July 11. Far-right networks in the UK and internationally have seized on Robinson's jailing to portray the former English Defence League founder as a "free speech martyr."

A crowd of Robinson's supporters assembled in St. Peter's Square at around midday, next to the Town Hall and just yards from the city centre's main police station. From there they announced by megaphone that "we're going to do everything inside the Arndale Centre, straight in, and then we'll do everything from the inside."

Given the substantial CCTV and police presence in the city centre—particularly since the terrorist attack at nearby Manchester Arena just two years ago—there is no innocent explanation for the events that transpired.

"Static" protests in the UK do not require police authorisation or formal notice, but the UK government's website stipulates police must be informed in writing "6 days before a public march." Police have extensive and Draconian powers over public marches, including the authority "to change the location, limit how long a rally lasts, limit the amount of people who attend, stop a sit-down protest if it blocks road traffic or public walkways."

Greater Manchester Police not only exercised none of those powers, they stood back and refused to prevent criminal acts, including physical threats, intimidation, harassment and hate speech directed against members of the public and RCG whose property was trashed—all of which was captured on video. No arrests were made, and no charges have been laid.

After they left St. Peter's Square, the mob marched through Manchester city centre, causing major disruption on

two busy thoroughfares as they halted traffic, including trams and buses. Video footage shows them entering the Arndale centre without hindrance from security guards or police, who were now at the demonstration.

Once inside the Arndale, the far right turned one of its central atriums, Exchange Court, into the venue for a political rally. Speakers addressed the assembled fascists below from an upper balcony draped with a large "Free Tommy" banner. In a city with a large Muslim population, Robinson's supporters issued fascist denunciations of so-called "Muslim rape gangs."

Later that day, a spokesperson for Arndale confirmed that police stood off. "A police presence was maintained throughout," the spokesperson told the *Manchester Evening News*, admitting that police and security had the march under surveillance as it moved throughout the city. "Our security team were in close liaison with police to support in monitoring the situation." Further confirmation of the role of the police was confirmed in a tweet from the Arndale after the fascists departed, reading, "We were not aware of the group's plan to enter the centre and were guided by police in the safe management of such a large protest."

Shoppers inside the Arndale were shocked and told the WSWs they feared for their safety. Mental health support worker Kathleen, 33, heard the commotion, telling our reporter, "It was only when I saw people waving the British flag that I realised who it was. They went into the Arndale centre shouting 'Free Tommy Robinson.' I saw them talking to a girl who was opposing them. People were looking on in disgust. It's shocking that these people are stirring up hatred so blatantly and they're proud to be doing so. They're aggressive, though they're only a small group and I don't want to be around people like that."

Locals took to social media to express their anger, with a woman tweeting that her 13-year-old daughter and three friends, two of whom are Muslim, "were terrified" when Robinson fans "took over the mall." Another local tweeted, "If anyone's in Manchester City centre atm don't go in the Arndale, there's a massive Free Tommy Robinson protest

holding up all the shopping with banners etc. One of the protestors threaten to ‘rip my phone out my hands’ for taking a photo of them.” Another wrote, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more chilling than a large group of racists marching through the Arndale then hunkering down, chanting for Tommy Robinson. Absolutely vile.”

After leaving the Arndale, the fascists again halted traffic as they marched along Market Street and into Piccadilly Gardens. Confronting and surrounding the RCG’s stall in the full presence of police officers, they wiped the campaign table of literature, ripping and stamping on newspapers and posters. A young RCG member at the stall was surrounded by dozens of men who hurled racist abuse and hate speech, while another member was forced to the ground as he sought to prevent the group’s speaker system being stolen by the fascist thugs.

In a statement published yesterday on Facebook, RCG spokesperson Bob Shepherd noted, “Luckily none of us suffered any physical injuries although one comrade was continuously racially abused by them. When she pointed out to Police ‘Liaison Officers’ that she was being racially abused they replied that they were ‘monitoring the situation!’ The police did nothing to stop the attack on our stall.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Manchester Police yesterday to enquire whether the thugs who attacked the RCG’s stall have been apprehended and whether charges have been laid. No reply has been received.

The Arndale is a privately-owned 1.6-million-square-foot shopping centre with 250 retail tenants. As any left-wing activist can testify, any attempt to campaign either at the entrance or inside such areas would rapidly result in removal and/or arrest by security guards and police, including armed units.

The invasion of the Arndale and the attack on the RCG is just the latest example of state support and encouragement for the far right.

In June 2018, a series of “Free Tommy” marches saw far-right hooligans given free rein by London Metropolitan police to rampage through central London streets, jumping on cars and buses, hurling abuse at passers-by, assaulting counter-demonstrators and even scaling the railings of the official prime ministerial residence—actions that would invite immediate arrest if carried out by left-wing demonstrators.

One month later, RMT leader Steve Hedley was assaulted by fascists after he spoke at a Stand Up to Racism demonstration in London. His partner was also assaulted and ended up in hospital. This was followed in August by an attack on the left-wing Bookmarks bookshop in central London run by the Socialist Workers Party. Again, no charges were laid.

In January, far-right activists surrounded a Rail, Maritime and Transport union picket line at Victoria Station in Manchester, verbally abusing striking guards.

While Robinson’s supporters claim they have been silenced by the British establishment, nothing could be further from the truth. Their protests defending Robinson have been accorded saturation media coverage. Robinson’s financial and political backers include top donors for US President Donald Trump, including Robert Mercer.

Among the speakers in Manchester were far-right figures James Goddard, Danny Tommo, Davey Trump and Dylan Cresswell. Tommo, who organises national protests in consultation with Robinson, met with the latter in Belmarsh prison only days before the Manchester rampage. He visited Robinson with another key far-right figure, Ezra Levant. Levant’s Rebel Media, the US think tank Middle East Forum and the Gatestone Foundation, backed by key Trump supporters, have funnelled money and support to Robinson.

But these connections go right to the office of newly installed Prime Minister Boris Johnson. In July 2018, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon described Robinson as “the backbone” of Britain. That same month, Bannon helped then-Foreign Secretary Johnson to craft his speech of resignation from May’s frontbench. One month later, Johnson launched what was effectively the platform for his own stake to the Conservative Party leadership—a column in the *Telegraph* that vilified Muslim women who wore the face veil as “letter boxes” and “bank robbers,” in a deliberate appeal to the anti-Muslim tropes of the far right.

The attack by Robinson’s supporters in Manchester takes place in a definite context. As in the United States, nationalism and chauvinism are being deliberately stoked by powerful factions of the ruling class who are preparing for the consequences of a no-deal Brexit and who see the far right as a potential ally against the working class.



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