

Woman pinned down by police officers in London: “I can’t breathe”

Thomas Scripps
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Thousands have demonstrated in London, Manchester, Cardiff, Nottingham, Bournemouth and Dublin over the last few days to protest the police killing of George Floyd. More protests are planned today in Hyde Park in London, Parliament Square on Saturday, and outside the US embassy Sunday. On Saturday, protests will be held in other UK cities.

Demonstrations in cities across the world express the solidarity felt by workers and youth internationally for their brothers and sisters confronting brutal repression in America. They are also founded on a common experience of police brutality.

On May 31, footage surfaced on twitter of six police officers pinning a black woman to the ground in Lewisham, south London. This occurred at around 11 p.m. on May 9. In harrowing scenes similar to the videos showing Floyd’s murder, the woman, 28-year-old Kamyimsola Olatunjoye, repeatedly yelled “I can’t breathe!”—the same words used by Floyd before he was suffocated to death. A female police officer is shown repeatedly punching Kamyimsola, telling her, “Release your arm.” She stops only when she notices that her brutal and unprovoked assault is being filmed by a passer-by on his mobile.

Witnesses can be heard telling the police to stop and saying, “That’s not right.” The police responded by telling them to “Stay back” and “Move away.”

Kamyimsola was the passenger in a car pulled over to be searched under the Misuse of Drugs Act. She was ultimately charged only with “obstructing” a drugs search.

A few days before this event, 34-year-old Desmond Ziggy Mombeyarara was Tasered in front of his young son at a petrol station in Stretford, Greater Manchester. In scenes that were videoed, at 11 p.m. on May 6, Mombeyarara was told by police officers to “Release your hands” as he held on to his distressed child. Once he let go, two police officers attempted to seize his arms. When Mombeyarara tried to lift them out of their grip, the police told him “You’re the one that’s causing the problem” and shot him with a Taser. Mombeyarara collapsed to the ground and the police then

yelled at the stunned man to put his hands behind his back while his son screamed.

Mombeyarara, a National Health Service worker at the Manchester Royal Infirmary, had been pulled over for allegedly speeding. He was later charged with several driving offences and two counts of “resisting a constable in the execution of their duty.”

Both episodes provoked widespread outrage.

Dr Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, who first posted the footage of Kamyimsola on Twitter, said in her post, “Why would it take six police officers to pin down one woman in Lewisham? I can see police hitting her as she screams ‘I can’t breathe.’ [She was] shouting ‘Please stop’ as she’s being slapped! She’s restrained! This is unjustified unacceptable excessive force. #PoliceBrutality”

Mos-Shogbamimu added, “I’m very concerned at the level of excessive force used and want it thoroughly investigated. Beggars the question what else is happening without video footage.”

A commenter on the post said, “Unacceptable—this needs to stop. NOW.” “This is horrific. Why are 6 people needed to pin a woman down? U could have suffocated her!” “This is absolutely vile. They have to answer for their actions.” Another wrote, “People coming out of lockdown into this after witnessing [prime minister] Boris [Johnson] the clown protect his adviser for breaking the law. ... Temperatures will boil, ugly things will start happening.”

Responding to Mombeyarara’s Taser, one Facebook user wrote, “Disgraceful. The officer should be ashamed. ‘Put your hands behind your back NOW’. Quite difficult to do when you just got hit with volts I’d imagine. Hang your head in shame officer.” Another said, “Disgusting treatment and no reason can explain what they did especially in front of his child.”

In an event that was not captured on video, on May 4, a 23-year-old black man was Tasered while climbing over a wall in Haringey, north London as he tried to run away after police officers approached him. The man fell and was left paralysed from the waist down.

Police violence is increasing dramatically due to the growth of poverty, unemployment and the rise in social problems this produces.

In the last 12 months—with the last few in the middle of a lockdown—London’s Metropolitan Police increased their use of all forms of stop and search by 50 percent. In the year to April 2019 there were 20,981 stops. In the year to April this year there were 30,608. Only one in five searches led to any further action.

Between 2017-18 and 2018-19, the annual number of searches under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act increased by 30 percent to 172,237. The use of Section 60 stop and search in London increased by a massive 425 percent, from 1,836 to 9,599 searches.

Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act allows a police inspector to designate an entire area for up to 24 hours in which anyone can be searched without reasonable suspicion.

These operations are overwhelmingly targeted at poorer areas of London, as a pretext for harassing working class youth. In just the last two weeks, Section 60 areas have been designated for periods of time in the London boroughs of Lewisham—where police attacked Olatunjaye—Newham, Westminster, Haringey, Islington, Hackney, Camden and Tower Hamlets—all amongst the most deprived areas of the capital.

A recording of one particularly obnoxious Section 60 search went viral on social media over the weekend. The video, viewed over 3 million times, shows a black off-duty ambulance driver being approached by a policewoman who asks what he is doing standing outside a house. When he replies he is just getting some fresh air, the police officer tells him, “At the minute, you’re going to be detained for a drugs search alright? There’s loads of intel that there’s drug dealing in this area okay? You’re here with your friends, there’s a couple of cars, and you haven’t really given me enough reason to believe that you’re here just seeing them in the Covid-19 situation.”

The man calmly accepts this demand but is then aggressively seized by the arm and handcuffed.

Under Section 60 searches, blacks are searched at 11 times the rate of whites and many commenters point to this episode as evidence of racist profiling. This influence is undoubtedly at work.

Police officers are recruited from the dregs of society, socially and ideologically backward sections of the middle class and workers. Many have swallowed a diet of xenophobia fed to them by politicians and the media long before joining up, which is then reinforced by the shared animosity they feel towards those they are called upon to control and punish—and which no amount of official training

in “cultural sensitivity” or the recruitment of officers from black and Asian backgrounds can ever dispel.

However, this only proves that intimidation and violence is essential to the police, not as individuals, but as a force dedicated to the suppression of the working class and especially the most socially vulnerable and deprived layers.

Katrina Ffrench, chief executive of police monitoring group StopWatch, explained that the organisation’s 2018 report “The Colour of Injustice” found that “the rates of stop and search carried out by police were affected more by levels of deprivation and inequality than crime. This in turn fuelled disproportionality, as people from black and other minority ethnic groups tend to live in deprived areas and were frequently subjected to stop and search.”

The stereotyping and brutalisation of black workers and youth flows from this fundamental class oppression, which does not spare white workers and youth.

On May 16, a white teenager in Manchester was mobbed by more than a dozen police officers during a stop and search operation. Five police vans were on the scene as three officers pushed his head up against a metal shutter and a fourth pushed him back against the wall by his chest. He was then manhandled into the back of a police van.

Chloe Seale recorded the incident and said, “He was being respectful towards them [the police], the next minute they grabbed him. He panicked, so more grabbed hold of him and slammed him into the shutters. One of the policemen had him by his throat at one point, then they took him to the van still shouting and swearing at him...”

“The police are never around when you actually need them, but when two young boys aren’t causing a problem they show up like the mob and bully them.”

As in the US, defeating this officially sanctioned and orchestrated thuggery requires a conscious mobilisation of the unified working class in defence of democratic rights against an increasingly authoritarian capitalist state.



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