

UK: NHS protest organiser fined £10,000 under pandemic legislation

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Greater Manchester Police (GMP) broke up a small protest by National Health Service (NHS) workers and their supporters in St Peter's Square, Manchester on Sunday, citing draconian COVID-19 legislation.

The organiser, Karen Reissmann, a mental health worker and a member of the Unison trade union's National Executive Committee, was fined £10,000. Another woman, a 65-year-old NHS worker, was briefly arrested for "failing to provide details having refused the opportunity to leave when asked," before being released and fined £200.

The protest was called after news broke last week that the Conservative government would be offering over 1 million NHS workers a paltry 1 percent pay rise for 2021-22—an effective cut after inflation. Around 20 people attended the Manchester protest, all wearing masks and observing social distancing. Reissmann, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, had announced the event as a "socially distanced and fully risk assessed protest".

Within a few minutes of her beginning to speak to the protestors, large numbers of police arrived, outnumbering the protesters and causing by far the main threat to social distancing on the day.

The *Manchester Evening News* (MEN) reported that, after speaking with the senior police officer, Reissmann told protesters, "Unfortunately, the police have now told us we can't proceed with this, despite what's going on in the health service, the impact on people, morale, the hurt, the distress and the traumatisation that we feel we can't go ahead and give this message."

She said they were threatened with the "full force of the law" if they did not comply.

At this point, the police began moving people out of the square, which has been a gathering place for demonstrations for decades going back to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre. Several protesters spoke briefly with the MEN as they left, describing the feeling among NHS workers. One explained, "As well being exhausted, everyone is very angry". Another told the newspaper, "I work in mental health and it's upsetting to see colleagues who've now got symptoms of

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from working on COVID wards."

In a further attack on democratic rights, police then told MEN reporters to leave the area.

Reissmann was served her £10,000 fine for organising the protest and showing, so the police claim, "a degree of non-compliance". The huge fine was the same level of punishment as that handed out to the organiser of an anti-lockdown rally in the nearby Piccadilly Gardens in the city last November, attended by roughly 600 people making a point of not wearing masks or social distancing.

The clampdown on the Manchester protest had immediate ramifications, with another protest against the NHS pay rise scheduled for yesterday afternoon in Sheffield called off by organisers under threat of the same penalty. Organiser Joan Pons Laplana told the *Sheffield Star*, "In view of yesterday's police action in Manchester, we have decided to cancel today's protest as we can't afford a £10,000 fine."

GMP's actions have nothing to do with protecting people from the threat of COVID-19. Speaking after the event, police superintendent Caroline Hemingway said, "With the positive step of schools reopening tomorrow, it is vital that people continue to follow Government legislation on social distancing and avoid gathering illegally in large numbers.

"Regardless of one's sympathies for a protest's cause, we would ask the public to maintain social distancing and follow legislation to prevent a rise in infections and provide the best possible chance of a further easing of restrictions in the weeks to come."

Hemingway was referring to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government opening schools to more than 10 million pupils, students and school and college workers with practically no safety measures in place, but a masked, socially distanced protest of 40 people is a risk too far.

From a public health standpoint, this is obviously absurd. But from the standpoint of the government's class war herd immunity policy, the abandonment of the lockdown and all public health measures to contain the pandemic and using the virus as a pretext to attack democratic rights, go hand-in-

hand.

The Socialist Equality Party warned in a March 3 statement, The end of the UK lockdown and the way forward for the working class, that in ending the UK's "last lockdown", Johnson was declaring "political war on the working class" and that "the sacrifice of workers' lives to the pandemic takes place under conditions of a ruthless effort to claw back from the working class the billions handed to the corporations."

This was confirmed by the effective pay-cut planned for NHS workers, revealed just days before the reopening of schools. The government know that their planned assaults on the lives and livelihoods of the working class will provoke mass opposition and are preparing the mechanisms for its suppression.

Last summer was marked by international protests against the police killing of George Floyd, police brutality and racism, which mobilised tens of thousands of people in cities across the UK. In response, leading police officials used the pandemic, and a fascist provocation encouraged by the government, to call for a ban on demonstrations. This became law in November, with Home Secretary Priti Patel removing an exemption for socially distanced protests included in previous pandemic restrictions on large gatherings.

The ban has already been used to intimidate striking workers. In November, strikers at the Optare bus factory in North Yorkshire were dispersed from a picket line by police. The case was due to be brought for judicial review but at the last moment the government conceded that the right to picket should be upheld.

A month later, however, police were repeatedly called against strikers at a DHL warehouse in Liverpool, in a blatant act of intimidation organised by the company.

In the ongoing indefinite strike at the Go North West bus company in Manchester, management have installed 80 new CCTV cameras enabling them to spy on pickets. No doubt any fleeting breach of social distancing will be used to justify a police crackdown.

The Labour Party fully support this agenda. A spokesperson for the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham backed police in Sunday's events, "The protest today was rightly a matter for the police to deal with and is not something in which the Mayor has any role.

"However, under current legislation protests and demonstrations are not permitted, whether we agree with the protest or not, and it is the responsibility of the police to uphold the law."

The government is preparing to extend its anti-democratic legislation. Last month, the *Observer* reported that Patel is looking at how to maintain the restrictions on protests

implemented as part of the lockdown in the post-COVID environment.

She wrote to HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services in September asking "what steps the government could take to ensure the police have the right powers and capabilities to respond to protests" so that those protests do not impact "the rights of others to go about their daily business".

The Inspectorate is now conducting a review which, the *Observer* reported, "will help Patel prepare a new law to curb protests that it is understood will target those that block parliament or affect judicial hearings, among other criteria."

The specific reference to "judicial hearings" is significant. The most-protested hearing in recent years is that of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who the British state is seeking to extradite to the United States to face a life sentence for exposing war crimes, torture and imperialist conspiracies.

A pro-Assange protest outside Westminster Magistrates Court was broken up by police in January. Several pro-Assange protestors were arrested outside the courthouse on COVID-19 charges, including a 92-year-old man. The police came mob-handed with roughly 50 officers and police vans, in what was clearly an attempt to intimidate future demonstrations of support.

Workers' opposition to the assault on basic democratic rights and their support for nurses fighting for a living wage is indicated by the fact that a GoFundMe page to pay Reissmann's £10,000 fine exceeded £15,000 in donations as of Monday evening.

A political response is required to defeat these assaults on the freedom of assembly and protest. Workers must take up this fight based on socialist political perspective for ending the pandemic—using whatever lockdowns, public health and workplace safety measures are necessary—while guaranteeing jobs and wages and the stability of small businesses.

This means the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of Labour and the trade unions which enforce the government's agenda, and the fight for a political general strike to bring down the Johnson government and ensure that the immense wealth of the corporations and billionaires are utilised for the needs of society.



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