

Demonstrations against draconian Police Bill and police brutality held in UK cities

Robert Stevens
18 March 2021

Protests spread against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill this week as the anti-democratic legislation passed its second reading in parliament. The Bill will massively increase the powers of the home secretary and police to restrict and even ban protests using the flimsiest pretexts.

On Monday, several thousand attended an evening rally against the Bill in London's Parliament Square. Protesters carried placards with statements including, "The police do not protect us", "No Justice, No Peace". Chanting "Kill the Bill" they marched through Westminster and Lambeth, including blockading Westminster Bridge twice. Demonstrators marched to the Metropolitan Police's New Scotland Yard headquarters.

Police arrested four people and issued fixed penalty notices to two.

On Monday and Tuesday, hundreds gathered in other cities for anti-police protests, including Manchester, Cardiff and Swansea. The protests mainly consisted of young people.

The new police legislation is being rushed through Parliament based on a review of policing protests demanded by Home Secretary Priti Patel, following last year's demonstrations by the environmental group, Extinction Rebellion, and those in opposition to police killings provoked by the murder of George Floyd.

The Bill allows the home secretary to create laws that define "serious disruption" to communities and organisations, which police can then rely on to impose draconian conditions.

The legislation will make it illegal to inflict "serious annoyance" on a person without reasonable excuse, with a judge being able to jail a person for up to 10 years. Clause 55 allows police to impose start and finish times and maximum noise levels on a wider range of protests in England and Wales. Under the legislation, a police officer will be given powers to take "such conditions as appear

necessary" to that officer "to prevent disorder, damage, disruption, impact or intimidation."

The Bill was introduced in Parliament on Monday and a second reading vote passed by 359-263 on Wednesday. The ruling Conservative Party has an 80-seat majority and the Bill is being passed with the backing of the Democratic Unionist Party whose eight MPs either abstained or did not vote. The main opposition Labour Party reluctantly voted against the Bill, despite supporting key parts of it such as the stiffening of sentences and after initially saying they would abstain. The Bill is now in Committee Stage for scrutiny and will be voted on in the House of Lords in the next weeks before becoming law.

This week's protests followed those at the weekend in London and other cities to protest the death of 33-year-old Sarah Everard. Metropolitan Police officers violently attacked a peaceful vigil held in the capital's Clapham Common, making four arrests and brutally assaulting women who attended. A Metropolitan Police officer, Wayne Couzens, has been charged with kidnapping and murdering Everard.

Numerous political forces are involved in the protests, including a feminist group Reclaim these Streets. Attempts are being made to channel protests against the killing of Everard—and police brutality in general—into support for increased police powers to supposedly safeguard women from men.

This week, the government outlined Project Vigilant which it is seeking to roll out under the guise of protecting women from sexual assault. It could see plainclothes police officers roaming around clubs and bars, along with increased police patrols as people leave these venues at closing time.

However, the protests around the country have been marked by their hostility to police brutality and opposition to them being given further powers. In Manchester, hundreds of young people marched down two of the city

centre's main thoroughfares, Market Street and Deansgate, chanting "Kill the Bill" and other slogans, before congregating in St Peter's Square at around 5pm for a rally. Placards included, referring to the home secretary, "Priti's Police State", 'Hands off our Rights" and "Defend Your Rights, People Died for Them".

St Peter's Square is only yards from the site of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre where 18 people were killed and up to 700 injured by a cavalry of Yeomanry and a regular army regiment as they appealed for adult suffrage and the reform of parliamentary representation.

Speakers said they were opposed to the police being given any additional powers. One speaker noted that less than two weeks ago, in the same square where the rally was taking place, Greater Manchester Police—utilising draconian COVID-19 legislation—broke up a small protest by National Health Service workers and their supporters. The organiser, Karen Reissmann, a mental health worker and a member of the Unison trade union's National Executive Committee, was handed a £10,000 fine by the police. The speaker noted to cheers from the audience that opposition to the fine was such "that we raised that money in under three hours."

A young woman pointed out, "This law gives police more powers to crack down on protests that have an impact. The whole point of a protest is to have an impact! And we've seen the way the police respond without this law. The response to the protest at Clapham Common this weekend where women came together to mourn the death of Sarah Everard, at the hands of a police officer, the way they disproportionately stop and search black people, who are more than nine times more likely to be stopped... the countless victims of police brutality for whom there has been no justice... They want to prohibit protests... they want it to be harder to resist... But the right to protest is fundamental."

The speaker noted that it was a Metropolitan Police operation, led by the Met's Chief Commissioner Cressida Dick, that resulted in the shooting to death of the young Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005.

The hostility to the two architects of the present clampdown, Patel and Dick, stands as a devastating rebuke to the attempt to channel opposition to the Bill into the dead end of identity politics and "female-centred reform."

A young man told the rally, "Our basic rights to oppose the system are being taken away from us. When we are protesting for basic pay rises and basic necessities, we are at the stage of rebellion. When does everything they do

start being a grounds of self-defence? When they are killing us and slowly taking our money away, if not directing killing us, by killing us economically."

Another speaker said, "Our opposition, the Labour Party, are doing f*** all", to which a member of the audience responded in reference to the Labour leader, "F*** Keir Starmer." This sparked repeated chants of "F*** Keir Starmer, "F*** Priti Patel, F*** Boris Johnson" and "F*** the Tories."

Another young speaker said, "It's not just the London Met [police]. We cannot forget that this problem is systemic... It was Greater Manchester Police who fined a health worker £10,000. It was Greater Manchester Police who targeted Black Lives Matter protesters last summer. It was Greater Manchester Police who invaded Fallowfield [student halls of residence] in September and turned Owens Park [part of the same complex] into a police state. It was Greater Manchester Police that have consistently abused their powers."

The rally ended with a minute's silence "for all victims of police brutality."

In Cardiff, up to 400 people protested Monday outside Cardiff Bay police station from 6pm and remained for around an hour. Among the placards were ones reading, "There is no end to protest until there is an end to repression," and "The power of the people is stronger than the people in power".

Many of those who attended have been protesting regularly since the January 9 death of 24-year-old Mohamud Hassan. Hassan died just hours after he was released from police custody. *Wales Online* reported, "Legal representatives for his family have said that he was severely injured when he was released. They have said witnesses described him as covered in blood with severe injuries to his mouth and severe bruising all over his body."

Another anti-Police Bill protest took place Monday in Swansea outside the Magistrate's Court and Police Station.



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