

# UK police and government step up repression against Police Bill protests

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Protesters were brutally attacked by police during demonstrations of thousands of people held for the second consecutive weekend in UK cities against the draconian Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill.

The Bill has passed its second reading and is expected to return to Parliament in June for its final stages before becoming law. Given the Conservative's 80 seat majority, the Bill will pass.

Demonstrations against the Bill are routinely described in the media as “violent” and protesters as a “mob”, but the real violence has been carried out by police *against* those defending their right to protest which faces elimination if the Bill becomes law.

On Thursday, it emerged that police claims that officers suffered injuries at the hands of the mainly young demonstrators in last week's protests were lies. Last Monday, Avon and Somerset police, who oversee policing in Bristol, issued a statement claimed that “a total of 20 officers were assaulted or injured and two of them were taken to hospital after suffering broken bones. One of them also suffered a punctured lung.”

This was used by the government and their echo chamber media to demand that protesters face the full force of the law, as police pledged mass arrests.

On Wednesday, another Avon and Somerset statement admitted that “following a full medical assessment of the two officers taken to hospital, neither were found to have suffered confirmed broken bones.” Head of Avon and Somerset Andy Marsh admitted that no police officer had suffered a punctured lung.

Bristol has been at the centre of the protests, with a third demonstration held Friday night. Around 1,000 mainly young people gathered at College Green and held a peaceful protest as they marched around the city centre.

After being blocked by a phalanx of riot police with

shields and batons from protesting outside Bridewell Police Station, protesters staged a sit-down protest in the Haymarket area. A four-deep line of riot police stood between them and the station. At around 10pm squadrons of riot police, including police on horseback and with dogs, moved to disperse the crowd. In the face of repeated assaults by police, they chanted “we are peaceful what are you?”

The brutal operation lasted well over two hours, included the use of mounted police charges with police making 10 arrests. Mobile phone footage on social media shows police attacking defenceless people with riot shields and hitting others with batons. One female protester was punched in the face by a police officer. A prone man who looked to be in a semi-conscious state as he lay in a gutter was attacked and dragged along the street by police.

A young woman, Jasmine York, was attacked just days after suffering injuries from police the previous Sunday—including from a police dog and a baton strike. York told the *Guardian*, “A policewoman barged me with her shield and I tripped. I fell to the floor and I went on to my back. My phone went and my keys went [out of my pocket]. I had my knees up to my chest and my arms over my head. I had two policewomen on my left using their shields to batter me, and two men on my right and they were hitting me with batons.”

A journalist for the *Daily Mirror*, Matthew Dresch, suffered a brutal attack which he posted film of on Twitter with the comment, “Police assaulted me at the Bristol protest even though I told them I was from the press.” The footage, included in the video above, has been viewed nearly 2 million times.

The police were egged on Friday night by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel. Johnson made sure to mention a single firework that

was thrown at police lines during the disturbances, as he denounced “a mob intent on violence and causing damage to property. The police and the city have my full support.”

The frenzied law and order offensive was once more backed by Labour Party Mayor of Bristol Marvin Rees. After again claiming that outsiders had come from other cities “to protest or to cause conflict,” he declared, “Avon and Somerset Police in Bristol have shown they are capable of managing protests well and with sensitivity and have developed a strong culture of working with our communities.”

On Saturday, protests continued with demonstrations in Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham, Bradford, Brighton, Bath, Falmouth and Cardiff. Up to 1,000 protested in Sheffield, first gathering in Devonshire Green before marching around the city centre with sit-downs on the street outside the main police station on Snig Hill and the Town Hall on Pinstone Street.

In Manchester, hundreds protested in the city’s St Peter’s Square including sitting down and blocking trams there and in the Piccadilly Gardens area. Greater Manchester Police forcibly removed protesters and arrested 18 people between the ages of 17 and 27. Legal observer Ciara Bartlam, a barrister, told the *Manchester Evening News*, “They [the police] told protesters to move and at that point, as soon as the command was given to move, the officers became heavy-handed and pushed protesters off quite physically—grabbing, lifting, throwing protesters off the tracks... ”

As he did last week when police confronted anti-Police Bill demonstrators and when he spoke in favour of police breaking up a small protest of National Health Service workers earlier this month, Labour’s Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham said, “GMP had to manage a challenging situation carefully and we did not see a repeat of scenes seen in other parts of the country recently.”

There is even disquiet within ruling circles at the naked lurch to authoritarian police state measures, and the risk that this will inflame social and political tensions and expose the police as an instrument of state repression directed against the working class.

Michael Barton, the head of crime operations for policing nationally, and chief constable of Durham constabulary until 2019, told the *Guardian* that the new

laws could result in “paramilitary policing”. He continued, “I’m not in favour of even more restrictive measures. Surely after an historically unprecedented year-long curfew, in peacetime, the government could show some common sense and gratitude for such incredible forbearance to allow civil liberties to once again flourish. Or are they happy to be linked to the repressive regimes currently flexing their muscles via their police forces?”

The powers in the Police Bill “dangerously edge in that direction” of “a paramilitary-style police force.” If passed, “Police chiefs will be seen as the arbiters of what is and is not allowed when it comes to protest.”

Sir Peter Fahy, the former chief constable of Greater Manchester Police, referred to the case of Ricky Tomlinson, one of the Shrewsbury 24 construction workers framed up by the police for their role in a 1972 national strike, amid a period of enormous working class struggles that ended in the bringing down of the Heath Conservative government. Last week, after nearly 50 years, the 24 had their convictions quashed. Fahy commented that the Police Bill “is short-term and politically driven,” adding, “It is a reaction to what happened with Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter [protests], in the same way Ricky Tomlinson was a reaction to the industrial strife of the 1970s. Policing was drawn into a particular stance and pose.

“It reminds me of the [1984-85] miners’ strike when policing was mobilised for a political reason. It took policing a long time to recover... The policing of protest can cause long-term damage.”



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