

Mass arrest of protesters outside British hunger striker's prison

Robert Stevens
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On Saturday night, the Metropolitan Police violently arrested at least 86 protesters outside Wormwood Scrubs prison in west London. They had gathered peacefully in solidarity with Umer Khalid, a pro-Palestinian activist on a hunger and thirst strike whose life now hangs in the balance.

The demonstrators were demanding that prison governor Amy Frost put into writing and act on promises she had made regarding Umer's treatment. He has suffered solitary confinement, censorship, denial of access to his prayer mat and the Quran.

According to the Prisoners for Palestine organisation, Frost assured Umer that his "health is their priority and that he will be hospitalised should his health deteriorate," and that he would have daily meetings to discuss negotiations.

Umer suffers from limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder that causes progressive muscle weakness and wasting. His mother, Shabana Khalid, said his health was rapidly deteriorating and that he was increasingly fatigued and weak.

Doctors have warned that he may die within days. In a statement to Prisoners for Palestine, Dr Rupa Marya warned: "With no fluid intake, typically people die of acute kidney failure and other derangements within three to four days. With Khalid's underlying health condition, he is at increased risk of death even sooner."

Dr Marya herself, a longtime professor, was suspended from the University of California, San Francisco, for speaking out against the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The Met detained demonstrators on suspicion of aggravated trespass, justifying the crackdown with claims that protesters had "breached prison grounds" and obstructed staff. The Ministry of Justice threatened, "where individuals' actions cause risk or actual harm to hardworking staff, this will not be taken lightly and those responsible can expect to face consequences."

There is no evidence that any staff were harmed by the few people who managed to gain access to a staff lobby area of the prison, having previously been on publicly accessible areas of the prison grounds while exercising their right to protest.

Videos from the scene show officers violently dispersing the crowd, including pensioners who were punched, kicked and restrained face down on the floor by police. Officers are seen shoving demonstrators to the ground, handcuffing them and forcibly removing people whose only "crime" was expressing solidarity with a political prisoner facing death.

Part of the police operation involved the kettling of protesters at around 10pm on Saturday, preventing them from leaving the area. Among those arrested was Canary website videographer Ibrahim Abul-Essad, who was at the protest working as a journalist.

The Canary reported that its "sources on the ground say police then started picking off protesters one by one. Cops were heard saying 'arrest now, find evidence later.'"

The operation lasted until after 3am on Sunday, by which point the majority of those trapped in the kettle had been arrested. This included countless people who did not enter the grounds of Wormwood Scrubs and were on the pavement outside, or who did enter but left when ordered to do so by police.

The Canary said the Metropolitan Police took detainees to over a dozen sites across London while refusing to disclose where individuals were being held. "The Canary has even had parents of people arrested reaching out to us, desperate for information," it reported.

The mass arrests demonstrate once again the Labour government's commitment to suppressing protests against Israel's ongoing assault on the Palestinians.

Umer has not been convicted of any crime. He has been held on remand since June 2025 and, as it stands, will face more than a year and a half in prison before coming to

trial.

Five activists, including Umer, are accused of entering Britain's largest Royal Air Force base, Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire and spray-painting military aircraft and infrastructure with red paint, symbolising the genocide carried out against the Palestinians by Israel. The activists deny the charges against them, which include alleged break-ins and criminal damage.

Umer resumed his hunger strike two weeks ago and stopped drinking water a day before Saturday's protest. In a statement, Prisoners for Palestine said: "The decision to escalate to a thirst strike occurred as the government continues to refuse—or even acknowledge—the prospect of a meeting."

On January 22, Al Jazeera reported that Umer was receiving fluids with electrolytes, sugars and salts but intended to stop drinking altogether from Saturday.

Speaking via an intermediary, he said: "The only thing that seems to have any impact, whether that is positive or negative, is drastic action. The strike reflects the severity of this imprisonment. Being in this prison is not living life. Our lives have been paused. The world spins, and we sit in a concrete room. This strike reflects the severity of my demands."

Umer is demanding immediate bail; an end to censorship in prison, including the withholding of mail, calls and books and the denial of visitation rights; an inquiry into British involvement in Israeli military operations in Gaza; and the release of surveillance footage from Royal Air Force spy flights over Gaza on April 1, 2024, when British aid workers were killed in an Israeli attack.

Having refused water 24 hours prior, Umer was taken to hospital from Wormwood Scrubs on Sunday before being returned later that day. His mother has not heard from him directly since Saturday. Prison authorities have placed a guard outside his cell and are monitoring him hourly—an implicit acknowledgment that the state is presiding over a potentially fatal situation.

Umer is the last remaining participant in a rolling hunger strike launched in November by activists linked to Palestine Action. He and seven others stopped eating in protest against their denial of bail, censorship in prison and the government's decision to proscribe Palestine Action under anti-terrorism legislation.

The last three participants—Heba Muraisi, Kamran Ahmed and Lewie Chiaramello—ended their strikes on January 14 after going without food for 73 days and 65–66 days, and in Lewie's case 46 days of intermittent

fasting.

They ended their strike stating that it had played a part in the Ministry of Defence's decision not to award a £2 billion contract to Elbit Systems UK, a subsidiary of Israel's largest weapons manufacturer.

Four of the original hunger strikers—Qesser Zuhrah, Heba Muraisi, Teuta Hoxha and Kamran Ahmed—are facing trial as part of the Filton 24 case for involvement in an August 2024 action against Elbit in Filton, near Bristol. Before its proscription, Palestine Action demanded the closure of Elbit's facilities in Britain.

The latest brutal mass arrests reflect the authoritarian character of the Starmer government, which has made solidarity with the Palestinian people a quasi-criminal activity.

So draconian was the July 5, 2025 proscription of Palestine Action—the first time a peaceful direct action group had ever been banned—that it was condemned by the United Nations.

The proscription is being legally challenged in court, but it has served as the legal basis for a sweeping campaign of arrests, prosecutions and surveillance. So far, 2,717 arrests have been made for expressing support for the group, according to the Defend Our Juries campaign group. This equates to a staggering 13 arrests a day nationally.

If Umer Khalid dies in prison, it will not only be a tragedy but a political crime, exposing the brutality of a system that defends imperialist interests at the expense of human life. Workers, students and youth must demand his release and an end to the prosecution of pro-Palestine activists. This struggle must be linked to opposition to Britain's support for Israel and to the broader fight against imperialist war and the onslaught on democratic rights.



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