

UK home secretary demands climate change protesters face “full force of the law”

By Laura Tiernan
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Mass arrests of climate change protesters continued in London yesterday, after the Conservative government’s Home Secretary Sajid Javid demanded police “use the full force of the law.”

More than 682 protesters have been arrested since Monday.

“No one should be allowed to break the law without consequence,” Javid tweeted Thursday morning. He called on police to “take a firm stance” against “any protesters who are stepping outside the boundaries of the law” and “significantly disrupting the lives of others.”

Javid’s statement followed well over 100 additional arrests in the centre of London Wednesday, after Scotland Yard demanded protesters be cleared from Parliament Square. Social media footage showed hundreds of police marching in formation from Millbank, with protesters later dragged away.

Javid issued his threats despite the peaceful tactics of protesters who have occupied public spaces including Parliament Square, Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Bridge, Oxford Circus and Marble Arch. While hundreds have been arrested, just 10 people have so far been charged with any offence.

After widely publicised protests in London yesterday, the Metropolitan Police confirmed that 106 arrests were made. At Oxford Circus, actress Emma Thompson addressed demonstrators from a pink wooden boat in the middle of the road. “We are here in this little island of sanity and it makes me so happy to be able to join you all and to add my voice to the young people here who have inspired a whole new movement,” she said. Rings of police surrounded the boat before moving in to make arrests.

On Thursday evening, London Metropolitan Police issued a statement confirming more than 1,000 police

had been mobilised and restating that under Section 14 orders, protests at Waterloo Bridge, Oxford Circus and Parliament Square were “illegal.” The statement followed a meeting between Javid and Met Chief Cressida Dick.

The Met responded to demands by Javid and others for tougher police action by explaining they were operating within legal constraints and with resources stretched to breaking point: “We have been asked why we are not using tactics such as containment—physically and forcibly stopping the protesters from moving around. The simple answer is we have no legal basis to do so. These are peaceful protesters; while disruptive their actions are not violent towards police, themselves or other members of the public.”

The media responded with demands for stepped-up repression, as urged by Javid.

On Thursday, Sky News presenter Adam Boulton attacked protesters for “fascistic disruption” in a clear attempt to redefine and criminalise the right to protest.

Boulton was articulating the stance of large sections of the media and political establishment. On Wednesday night, the *Daily Mail* carried a comment written by former Labour Home Secretary, now Sir David Blunkett. He railed, “Why hasn’t the full force of the law been used against these eco-anarchists who fill me with contempt?”

“As Home Secretary between 2001 and 2004 I had to deal with the anti-globalisation protests and the Reclaim the Streets movement. I had to make decisions as to how far you allow these protests to go.”

Blunkett accurately described Labour’s draconian and anti-democratic response at the time: “What I learned was that you had to be tough. The full force of the law needs to be used against those who have been warned and yet who persist with their anti-social

protests.”

On Thursday night, the Met warned that protests planned the following day at Heathrow Airport would be met with “firm action ... We have requested mutual aid from other police forces to support our operation.”

The next morning dozens of police lined the streets around Heathrow Airport and surrounded a small group of protesters from Extinction Rebellion Youth. The 10 teenagers occupied a traffic island and did not impede entry to the airport. They held a banner that read, “Are we the last generation?”

Samar Faraj, 14, told reporters, “In 30 years’ time, I don’t want to be looking back on this and regretting not doing everything I could do to help prevent the disasters we’re facing.” Her fellow-protester Nathan Hunter, 15, said, “I’m protesting today because I don’t want to wake up in 15 years and regret that I didn’t do more to stop the climate crisis. I don’t want to live in a future defined by an unstable climate; A world where future generations may not be able to live happy, healthy lives—or even have lives at all.”

This week’s protests were organised by Extinction Rebellion (XR), attracting support from students and disparate sections of the middle-class, including retirees and professionals. An XR protest outside oil giant Shell’s corporate headquarters was joined by leading environmental lawyer Farhana Yamin, who helped draft the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015. Yamin superglued herself to the footpath outside Shell, telling reporters, “the legal process is pretty broken right now. And we’re having to break law rather than make law, because of the inaction of 30 years now of these companies.”

A press release issued by XR explained that their members had deliberately caused more than £6,000 of damage to Shell property to ensure their case is heard by a Crown Court jury (rather than a magistrate), where they hope to publicise their concerns over the activities of Shell.

XR’s protest actions, including blocking roads and light rail networks, are based on appeals to the capitalist state. XR is calling on the government to declare a climate emergency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025, and create a Citizens’ Assembly on ecological justice. XR explains such an assembly would comprise “randomly selected” members of the public who would supposedly “work

together” on a “non-partisan basis” to solve the climate emergency.

While most climate change protesters arrested this week were released under investigation and without charge, the Met confirmed Thursday that they would “be brought back to be formally interviewed and charged as appropriate in due course.”

The statements by Sajid Javid, Blunkett and the vitriolic media attacks are a foretaste of how the state will respond to any movement in the working class. The arguments being deployed to justify police repression—including “disruption” and “inconvenience” to the public—will be used tomorrow to demand mass arrests and repression against striking railway workers, bus drivers, pilots and cabin crew, or NHS staff.

Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan duly joined the Metropolitan Police in using the protests to push for more police funding: “The Met’s ability to police protests without impacting on core policing priorities—such as tackling knife crime—has been made significantly harder by the huge cuts to government police funding.”

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