

Metropolitan Police impose London-wide ban on Extinction Rebellion protests as arrests top 1,600

By Chris Marsden
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Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists yesterday defied a London-wide ban on protests by the Metropolitan Police (Met). The basis cited for the ban Monday evening was a revised Section 14 order, of the Public Order Act, stipulating that by 9:00 p.m., “any assembly linked to the Extinction Rebellion ‘autumn uprising’ ... must now cease their protests within London.”

The ban was followed by the despatch of hundreds of police to clear tents from Trafalgar Square, the one area where protests have previously been sanctioned after other protests were declared illegal and demonstrators subject to arrest.

Four people, who had locked themselves together inside a tent, were cut out of their locks by police. Pamela Williams, 71, had glued herself to where her tent stood. She told the press that protesters were only given 30 minutes’ notice to quit before the 9:00 p.m. deadline.

One of those arrested was Ellie Chowns, a Green Member of the European Parliament (MEP). She said in a video posted on Twitter, “Yesterday, public protest was banned throughout our capital city. This is a completely unjustified and disproportionate measure. ... The rules have been changed. ... No longer is any space in London allowable for peaceful democratic protest.”

Another Green MEP present, Scott Ainslie, said Chowns was “singled out” after asking police officers why Trafalgar Square needed to be cleared. “I turn my back for two minutes to speak with a police officer and when I get back she is being arrested. We asked the police the same thing—what has changed? Why are we now being threatened with arrest?”

An XR spokesman said, “With draconian measures and not very clear bases, police are telling protesters they no longer have the right to peacefully assemble in protest.”

On Tuesday, police began demanding several hundred

protesters camping at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens quit the area. This included many who had moved from Trafalgar Square.

Protests continued yesterday, including at the headquarters of MI5, the security service, outside Buckingham Palace and at Trafalgar Square against the London-wide ban on XR. One of XR’s founders, Gail Bradbrook, led a protest at the Department for Transport in London.

On Monday, protesters had targeted the City of London, the capital’s financial district, blocking the crossroads outside the Bank of England—with the police responding by making 76 arrests on charges of criminal damage and obstruction of a highway. One of those targeted was 77-year-old Rabbi Jeffrey Newman, of the Finchley Reform Synagogue in north London, who was leading a 30-strong group.

Newman was kneeling and praying when he was arrested. He is an adviser to the International Secretariat of the United Nations’ Earth Charter, setting out 16 principles for a sustainable global society.

The Met made special mention of the impact on the City when announcing the London ban. Deputy Assistant Commissioner Laurence Taylor, after citing “ongoing serious disruption to the community,” said, “Today, protesters targeted areas in the City of London, causing further disruption to people and businesses in London’s financial district. Police made more than 90 arrests. ... The policing operation continues, and we will continue to take action against anyone engaged in unlawful protests at locations targeted by Extinction Rebellion.”

By Wednesday morning the Met had arrested 1,642 people since the protests began on October 7.

The policy of mass arrests and now an unprecedented city-wide ban is a major stepping up of state repression

that will not stop at climate activists.

Civil rights campaigners have questioned the legality of the Met ban. Human rights barrister Adam Wagner has questioned the legal basis for the move as “pretty draconian even under the wide-ranging powers granted to the police under s14 of the Public Order Act.” Revoking a permit should be proportionate, he added on Twitter, and the citywide ban appeared “extremely heavy handed even given previous disruption”.

Network for Police Monitoring coordinator Kevin Blowe told the *Guardian* that the order violated due process: “A ban has to be made by the home secretary. Our reading of it is that the section 14 powers are supposed to be used with caution because people still have a right to protest and potentially this is unlawful, and there is no other way to put it.”

Section 14 authorises police to “restrict...a number of people for a particular duration of time,” not a blanket ban. There is, therefore, a “potential legal challenge” to be made against the Met.

The civil liberties advocacy group Liberty said banning the protests was “grossly disproportionate” and an “assault on the right to protest.”

Amnesty International said it was “an unlawful restriction on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly...that would have a chilling effect on rights.”

For the Labour Party, Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott tweeted: “This ban is completely contrary to Britain’s long-held traditions of policing by consent, freedom of speech, and the right to protest.”

Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan would not even go so far as to make a formal denunciation. He was only “seeking further information from senior officers about the operational decision to impose a section 14 order on the Extinction Rebellion Autumn Uprising—including at Trafalgar Square—and why this was necessary.”

Khan added that he believed “the right to peaceful and lawful protest must always be upheld. However, illegal action by some protesters over the past eight days has put undue pressure on already overstretched police officers, and demonstrators should bear this in mind when considering any further actions.”

Despite such verbal protests, the powers of the police will continue to be extended and deployed more widely under conditions where social and political tensions become ever more acute. The Home Office already told the BBC last week that police powers on how to deal with protests are being reviewed.

Britain’s most extreme example of the turn to state repression is regarding Extinction Rebellion, but the treatment meted out in France to the Yellow Vests was even more brutal, and last weekend’s XR protest in the Netherlands, Czech Republic, and Belgium saw well over 700 arrests. Of these, 435 were in Brussels, made after police used water cannon and pepper spray on activists gathered in front of the Royal Palace in the city centre.

In Australia, dozens of arrests of XR protesters have been followed by detention in custody for over 30 hours, bans on entering a 2.5-kilometre radius encompassing much of Sydney’s central business district and forbidding contact with other XR members.

The Met’s London-wide ban was imposed even as police in Spain were mounting a savage clampdown in several cities on thousands protesting the imprisonment of 12 Catalan separatist leaders on trumped-up charges relating to the October 1, 2017, Catalan independence referendum. Police attacked tens of thousands of people rallying in downtown Barcelona and marching on El Prat airport, where people were beaten, and rubber bullets and noxious foam used. In total, 78 protesters were hospitalised, including 38 who were still in hospital at the end of the day.

As the WSWS warned when the latest XR protests began, “The methods being developed against XR are in preparation for far broader use against the working class in the period immediately ahead...the ruling elite and its repressive state apparatus knows that climate protests involving millions are unfolding under conditions of rising social and political discontent, including strikes, and that XR’s call for direct action can have a far broader resonance.”

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