

Protests as police deny Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller children entry into Manchester, UK

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On Friday last week, around 300 Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers and supporters marched through the streets of Manchester to protest an outrageous act of discrimination and attack on democratic rights by the police.

Organised by the Gypsy Travellers League, demonstrators protested an incident on November 23 when Greater Manchester Police (GMP) issued a dispersal order to prevent the free movement in the city of teenagers and children from the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities. The youngsters had arrived by train to enjoy the Christmas markets taking place in the city centre.

The teenagers and children, some as young as 10 years old, who had travelled with older siblings or their families, were targeted by police in the city centre. Others were met in force by GMP officers wearing high-viz vests while disembarking at Victoria railway station.

Police bundled them back onto random trains, one bound for Doncaster in Yorkshire, a 45-mile journey. One parent reported that his son (aged 13) and daughter (15), ended up 100 miles away in Grimsby on the east coast.

A video circulating on social media shows what must have been a terrifying experience for the children. One boy is seen shouting repeatedly, “I don’t know where I’m going.” Some were in hysterics. One girl shouts, “Stop pushing, I’m going to fall,” as an officer screams, “Get on the train!”

TV celebrity Paddy Doherty, who stars in the show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, joined the march, telling the media, “It is absolutely appalling and sickening. Those kids have as much right to be there as anyone else.”

A Section 35 dispersal order is part of the draconian Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, giving police the power to exclude a person from an area

for 48 hours on the authority of an inspector.

In an attempt at damage limitation, GMP Assistant Chief Constable Rick Jackson issued a statement saying, “Our priority is always to protect public safety by preventing incidents of violence and disorder.

“Due to intelligence of groups causing antisocial behaviour on trains on the way into Manchester and similar reports rising around the city centre, alongside increasing footfall, we issued a dispersal order. This included plans for officers to reroute arriving groups back home.”

A spokesperson for the Traveller Movement charity countered, saying, “These children were simply trying to enjoy the festivities like everyone else. But instead, they have been unfairly targeted and marginalised.”

The children were guilty of nothing but high spirits. There have been no reports of anyone charged with a criminal offence, but under the terms of a Section 35 dispersal order these youngsters were treated as criminals.

In an interview on BBC Radio Manchester, Greater Manchester Labour Party Mayor Andy Burnham refused to apologise and defended the actions of the police, saying, “Everyone has got a place in our city region as long as people are coming to abide by the law and enjoy themselves... there was some intelligence that there was some intent to cause anti-social behaviour.”

At an earlier protest supported by Manchester Stand up To Racism, one speaker, Thomas, linked the repression of immigrants and asylum seekers with that facing travellers: “Refugees and travellers, we are tarred with the same brush.”

Another protest, a one-hour vigil, was held outside Parliament in London November 30. As reported by the *Traveller Times*, organiser Laura Angela Collins called for a “full investigation into these abuses and immediate

changes to ensure our communities are treated with dignity, respect and equality.”

The Runnymede Trust wrote a joint letter of complaint with Friends, Families & Travellers (@GypsyTravellers) to GMP Chief Constable Stephen Watson. “For far too long, Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities have faced over-policing, discrimination and race hate, and are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system,” it stated.

The Runnymede Trust notes that 46 percent of ethnic minority children including Gypsy Romany and Irish Travellers in the UK live in poverty. The overall child poverty rate has reached one in three.

The Traveller Movement is considering taking legal action against the police. CEO Yvonne MacNamara said, “Clearly, there has to be accountability here. Why did this happen? Why were these children racially profiled?”

Parents of children affected met with Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester for Policing and Crime Kate Green, who in her previous role as a local MP co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.

“Our questions [to Green] were, what was the legal framework? What were the thresholds that were met for this,” MacNamara said. “What was the intelligence and, of course, the risk assessment, given the ages of these children?”

The powers to hand out dispersal orders can only be enacted if a number of strict conditions are met. According to the government, these are:

An officer may give such an authorisation only if satisfied on reasonable grounds that the use of those powers in the locality during that period may be necessary for the purpose of removing or reducing the likelihood of—

(a) members of the public in the locality being harassed, alarmed or distressed, or

(b) the occurrence in the locality of crime or disorder.

(c) In deciding whether to give such an authorisation an officer must have particular regard to the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly set out in articles 10 and 11 of the Convention [European Convention on Human Rights Act 1998].

Failure to comply with a dispersal order means a sentence of up to three months in jail, a £2,500 fine, or both.

The law is formulated to be open to a wide degree of interpretation, with the potential to override articles 10 and 11 of the Convention, covering the freedoms of expression and assembly.

Section 35 is being utilised, in this case against the travellers, to normalise its use against the working class as a whole.

It was also used during the 100,000-strong demonstration against the Gaza genocide in London in December last year on the grounds that members of the public who support Zionism may suffer alarm and distress.

The act was deployed again in January to disperse homeless people living in tents near a London hospital. The Metropolitan Police were later forced to apologise for their inhumane action.

The Starmer-led Labour government is retaining every piece of the draconian legislation attacking democratic rights inherited from the Tories, including the Anti-Social behaviour, Crime and Policing Act. Within weeks of taking office, utilising riots by a few hundred fascists, Starmer announced the creation of a national police “standing army” which would clamp down on “all violent disorder that flares up. Whatever the apparent cause or motivation. We make no distinction. Crime is crime.”

Backed by its partners in the trade union bureaucracy, the right-wing Labour government is committed to the escalating wars in the Middle East and NATO’s war against Russia and conflict with China. It is preparing to hand over billions more to rearm the military at the expense of vital public spending. This cannot be carried out except by authoritarian means of rule.

By targeting and criminalising ethnic minority groups, in this instance Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers, as well as immigrants, Labour seeks to divide the working class against itself, deflecting attention from the real cause of plummeting living standards: capitalism and its wars.



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