

# Traveller Movement officer Yvonne MacNamara: “There were children arrested, put in handcuffs, herded back onto those trains”

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Yvonne MacNamara, CEO of the Traveller Movement, about the police dispersal of the children of Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers from the city of Manchester.

The Traveller Movement was founded in 1999 as a community organisation to combat the “gap in service provision and the marginalisation of the Irish Traveller community in Britain”. It advocates for and works with “Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to tackle discrimination and promote equality”.

Asked about the intelligence that prompted the police operation on November 23, Yvonne explained, “The police said they couldn’t share sources. There was a meeting with Greater Manchester Police, my colleague was in the meeting and the intelligence allegedly was that there was drinking [by the children] on the trains coming in. We have produced evidence to the contrary. The videos show well humoured children having a little sing song, no drinking in sight.

“The police also stated there was going to be violence—again no intelligence shared. They said there were 5-600 travellers [adults and children] in the city centre. The first thing we would query—since when have we started racially profiling people coming into the city centre?

“The other issue is: these were children. So if the police heard there was going to be violence, one, where was the risk assessment? And two, the videos show young girls dressed up in their bows and pearls; you’re not going to go out to fight in your finery with your mum, with your older sisters.

“Our question to the police: why issue a dispersal

order, why herd the kids onto the trains when you got it wrong? They didn’t have an answer for that; they said they couldn’t really comment on the ongoing investigation.

“The parents are very angry, their kids were traumatised and scared, and equally they were very humiliated by the treatment. Greater Manchester Police did say they were sorry for the humiliation and distress caused. Once the investigation is complete, they said they are happy to meet with community leaders again.

“There was absolutely no safeguarding guidance here. There were children arrested, there were children put in handcuffs, there were children herded back onto those trains. Some of those children came with their parents.

“There were two young girls put on a train. They were trying to plead with police officers that they came into Manchester with their mum, and she was parking the car in the Arndale [shopping] Centre and the police ignored them. They were herded onto those trains and ended up miles away—it didn’t matter where they came from. There’s a number of those cases.

“We know young people will have travelled to Manchester from the Welsh Borders, from Doncaster, Leeds, West Yorkshire, Derbyshire, but it didn’t matter, they were herded onto whatever train was on the platform. It’s absolutely shocking.

“We also heard the police told vendors not to serve food. The children put onto trains on long journeys had no food, they had no drink, they were separated from their families. It defies belief!

“You had parents driving round the country trying to

locate their children. It was pandemonium. They were just young boys and girls, coming into the Xmas markets, dressed up for the day meeting family and friends, their parents going shopping, and they were heading back to the markets with their friends.

“This is clearly racial profiling of two communities, Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies, and no regard for safeguarding children. When safeguarding minors you have to follow protocols.

“Outside the Arndale Centre, the police said they were helping the security, but the Arndale Centre did not confirm this. The police must have been diverted from the sporting events [being held in the city on the day] because there were so many police officers outside the Arndale Centre.”

Asked whether dispersal orders had been used before against these communities, Yvonne replied, “Not that I’m aware of. They’re usually used against football hooligans. I’ve never heard of them used against children who were clearly law abiding. The police can’t tell us what laws they had broken, other than they’ve had reports. Show us the evidence!

“One boy was arrested outside the Arndale Centre; he was later released without charge. I know two young girls were arrested; they were released without being charged. As far as we’re aware, there has been no charge brought against any young person. If there are charges to be brought, I think it’s going to be the other way round. Our organisation is submitting a complaint to the IOPC [Independent Office for Police Conduct].

“We’ve been inundated with calls from families, we’re making sure there’s legal support there for them.

“They thought nobody cared, but they weren’t expecting this backlash. The communities have really come together. There’s been protest marches organized by other groups.”



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