

Oppose Starmer's repression of anti-war protesters!

Robert Stevens
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Workers and youth must demand the release and dropping of charges of those arrested by London's Metropolitan Police during and after last Saturday's national March for Palestine held in London.

Police made 77 arrests, most for breaching draconian "conditions" enforced on the protest.

These included the violent arrest of Chris Nineham, a leading figure in the Stop the War Coalition (STWC)—one of the main organisers of the event. Nineham was held overnight, only released 19 hours later, and is charged with organising an illegal demonstration under the Public Order Act. His bail conditions ban him from attending any Palestine solidarity marches.

The attack on democratic rights by the British state, headed by Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government, escalated in the aftermath of the initial repression.

Two other speakers at the rally, former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, both now sitting as independent MPs, were not arrested but were asked by police to attend a police station the following day for questioning.

On Monday, Ben Jamal, the director of another of the main protest organisers—the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), Europe's largest Palestinian rights organisation—revealed he had also been charged on the same pretext as Nineham.

Jamal revealed that within two hours of his police interview, "Police officers turned up at my front door to inform me that charges were being brought against me." He pledged to "vigorously contest" the charges, stating that "What we saw on Saturday was a huge assault on the right to freedom of assembly and to protest..."

"It seems clear that the political intention was to create scenes of mass disorder which could be used to justify the Home Secretary intervening to ban all further marches. Despite this attempt, there were not scenes of mass disorder".

Evidence compiled by the organisers includes Jamal speaking from the stage of the rally—located on Whitehall near Downing Street—making clear the speakers' intention to

"walk as a delegation towards the BBC. We will carry with us flowers that we intend to lay at the gates of the BBC to protest at their failure to report the truth of genocide and to mark the cost in Palestinian lives of that failure".

He stressed, "We will walk peacefully, we will walk in silence. If the police stop us, which they probably will, we will lay those flowers at the feet of the police force to mark their complicity in supporting genocide by suppressing protest against that genocide."

More footage shows, in the words of the PSC, that "The delegation walked peacefully up to the police line at Whitehall with their flowers and requested to be let through. Our footage clearly shows the police choosing to beckon them through."

When the delegation reached a second police line at Trafalgar Square and requested permission to continue, the police refused. Another video shows Jamal calling for the delegation to disperse at this point, as he had said they would do so if police refused to allow them to pass at any stage. But then the violent arrests began.

On Monday, several dozen legal experts and solicitors wrote an open letter, "Defend the Right to Protest", to Labour government Home Secretary Yvette Cooper; the Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan; and Attorney General Richard Hermer.

The letter states that the arrest of Nineham and other participants at the demonstration, and subsequent charging of Jamal "represent a disproportionate, unwarranted and dangerous assault on the right to assembly and protest in Britain."

It notes that protest activity is "formally protected via the Human Rights Act 1998 through Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights," adding, "The conditions imposed by the Metropolitan Police on the PSC demonstration on 18 January 2025 were disproportionate and an abuse of police powers" which "seemed to be motivated by political considerations that seek to limit the efficacy of the protesters and shield state institutions from criticism."

The statement concludes that “charges should be dropped... an independent investigation should be conducted,” and “More fundamentally, we call for a repeal of the raft of anti-protest laws passed in recent years”.

Last Saturday’s national demonstration was the 23rd in the capital against Israel’s genocide in Gaza and attended by around 50,000 people. As detailed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the march was only permitted to go ahead at all after repeated protests by the leaders of the Palestine Coalition—made up of six organisations including the Stop the War Coalition and Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

Despite the event being well known in advance and advertised as a “*March for Palestine*”—with many such marches taking place peacefully in London over the past 15 months—police prevented a moving demonstration from taking place. It did so having initially approved a route last November from the BBC’s headquarters to Whitehall—which has been taken several times over the last 15 months.

The police then withdrew their permission following a concerted campaign by Zionist groups, the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis and around 80 MPs/peers.

Speaking to the *Times*, Mirvis claimed that it was a “failure of the Met’s duty to members of Jewish communities who no longer feel safe walking to and from their synagogues on the Sabbath.” This is a slander against peaceful demonstrations which contain many thousands of Jews, including survivors of the Holocaust and their relatives.

The WSWS has drawn attention to comments made last May by Met assistant commissioner Matt Twist. He told the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank, “On occasion we did not move quickly to make arrests... We are now much more focused on identifying reasonable grounds for arrest, acting where needed, and then investigating, so in these circumstances it’s very likely arrests would be made more quickly now.” With Starmer now in government, this agenda is proceeding.

In what was effectively a private update to the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Mark Rowley gave a speech at an event Sunday, following Saturday’s mass arrests by the Met.

Addressing demands by another Zionist outfit—the Campaign Against Antisemitism, to outright ban pro-Palestinian marches—Rowley apologised, “There is no power in law to ban these protests is the first point.. Secondly, we don’t authorise any protest. The law doesn’t give us that power.”

However, “we’ve used conditions on the protests more than we ever have done before in terms of times, constraints, routes.” The Met had introduced “sharper and stronger

restrictions” on the protest’s organisers, he added, and, referring to the ban on the BBC-Whitehall route, “taken account of the punitive disruption on communities, particularly on the business communities in central London and on Jewish communities.”

The most significant aspect of Rowley’s comments was the reassurance to his audience that “almost never before” had the police made “terror-related” arrests at protests but they had made “many tens of those” over the past 15 months.

These comments must be understood in the context of an ever-wider criminalisation of anti-war protest, and anti-government protest generally, in the space of just a few years. Already armed with a battery of anti-democratic legislation, successive Labour and Conservative governments have shifted the definition of “extremism” to encompass numerous and widespread forms of protest and political thought and activity.

Israel’s genocide in Gaza has served to accelerate this process, with the government scrambling to silence the millions opposed to this historic crime.

In the leadup to the mass protest in London of around 800,000 in November 2023, Conservative government Home Secretary Suella Braverman described it as a “hate march” that should be banned by the Metropolitan Police—winning the support of then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

In March 2024, just prior to his leaving office to be replaced by Sir Keir Starmer and Labour’s even more forcibly pro-war, pro-genocide government, Sunak mounted a podium in front of Downing Street to collectively denounce millions of people who had protested the genocide in Gaza as “extremists”.

Committed to a programme of war and support for war and genocide abroad, and austerity at home, the British ruling class is turning to authoritarian forms of rule. This cannot be countered purely by an appeal to legal and democratic rights—which are being curtailed and ignored. These rights must be fought for, but they can only be secured as part of a socialist struggle against imperialist war and capitalist exploitation, based on the international working class.



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