

The policing of peaceful student demonstrators in London was heavy-handed and disproportional from the outset – and it got worse as the day proceeded

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As more stories and pictures are published about the student protests in London on 9 December 2010, a very different narrative emerges from that painted by the mainstream media. Controversy is increasing over the strong-arm tactics clearly used by the Metropolitan Police against parts of the large majority of peaceful student protestors. Theresa May, the Home Secretary, has repeated the mantra that 'peaceful protest is acceptable'. But [Charlotte Gerada](#) and [Hero Austin](#) show in detail that this message had clearly failed to get through to police on the ground. From the outset some officers seemed determined to punish peaceful protestors, in order to intimidate and deter them from any future attempts to show their opposition to tuition fees.



Last Thursday (9 December) as sabbatical officers of the [LSE's Student Union](#) we were leading over 400 LSE students, staff and academics to the demonstration on 'Day X' – the day of voting the future of fees in the House of Commons. Spirits were high, and people felt that this was their last opportunity to show the government that its proposals for higher education were short-sighted, ideological and deeply damaging. Causing traffic from the Aldwych to grind to a halt, the LSE contingent marched in the roads accompanied by the police, chanting 'No ifs. No buts. No education cuts!'

The LSE students and staff had originally planned to peacefully march over Waterloo Bridge to meet their peers from colleges, schools and universities on the other side of the bridge. However, the police were already there in force, and fought with individuals who tried to pass over the bridge. Sherelle Davids, a first year student at the LSE explained: 'We were only trying to continue on our peaceful march, and police were literally running towards us, grabbing us and throwing us away from them.' Many complained about the conduct of police action, completely disproportional to the actions. Sherelle said: 'My friend tried to get away, but got winded in the process by a police officer. It was absolute mayhem and there was no need for it'.



Image Credit: Richard Pope

Along with the LSE contingent and Kings College students who had joined us, we decided to listen to the police's commands, and so our group of the protest marched onwards down the Strand. There the enlarged group was joined by other protestors from the highly peaceable [Woodcraft Folk](#), Brighton University, and eventually University of the Arts London, the main University of London Student Union, and university students and staff union branches from up and down the country, as well as trade unions. We all congregated at Trafalgar Square and marched on from there at about 1pm.

Protesters finally made their way to parliament and the LSE contingent staged a mass sit-down, chanting 'Sit down if you hate the Con-Dems.' Despite the relatively peaceful atmosphere amongst the protestors, police soon began to use disproportionate force and actions, without violence from protestors occurring. At one point, police pushed the large metal barriers onto the crowd, crushing those below. They continued despite protestors shouting that people were being hurt and they couldn't follow police orders to 'get back' because of the thousands of protestors behind them.

Hero was one of the students crushed by the fence and her account was that:

'The police were out of control. They crushed us onto the floor by using the metal barriers as weapons. I was forced onto the floor, had my legs trampled on and tried to protect myself and my friend who was being suffocated. However, whenever we reached up to push the barriers off us so that we could stand up, the police hit people's hands with batons. I got bruised all over.'

Many protesters felt like they'd lost trust in police integrity. In Hero's opinion: 'The police were not there to protect us. I'm hurt and confused by the entire ordeal. Their actions were disproportionate, fierce and chaotic'.

[Kettling](#) (a controversial police tactic of forcibly imprisoning demonstrators in small zones for many hours) and police charging began from mid-afternoon, despite there being no instances of violence at that point. Children, as young as 14 tried to leave peacefully, whilst police prioritised parents with children and eventually those under 16, provided that they showed ID. Protesters felt trapped, unprotected and perplexed by the police's decision to kettle as early as 3pm.

Gaelan Ash, a second year LSE student armed only with a placard commented: 'I was appalled and disgusted at the police's actions. If you look at the chronology of events, you'll realise that kettling is an inflammatory tactic. The police were dishonest and aggravating and they made us feel powerless.'

Protesters were kettled late into the night, because police tactics were inconsistent. Eventually the police decided that everyone should be let go. But as protesters were released over Westminster Bridge, the police suddenly changed their mind about their decision, and several thousand protesters were once again kettled at the other end. Students of the LSE were trapped until as late as midnight.

Lois Clifton, a second year student experienced police violence on several occasions: 'The police just went mental, grabbing anyone they could to stop them leaving the bridge. A friend of mine got his hood ripped off as they tried to grab him, and when I questioned why they did that, the police officer pushed me forcefully and demanded that I apologise to the police officer for even questioning his conduct.'

LSE students slowly filtered back to the LSE occupation, in dribs and drabs throughout the night. Each of them their own horrific story of violence and intimidation used against them throughout the day, and especially at night. Lois ended by saying 'I am infuriated by how the police treated me – like I was some kind of kid who should be punished for calling the police out. Loads of my friends got hurt, with cuts, bruises and scratches to prove it.'

Many protesters left feeling disheartened by the Commons vote to triple student fees, and bewildered by police action. But rest assured that the fight will still go on. There are still so many issues we need to fight about: the cuts to Educational Maintenance Allowance (a small but vital grant paid to low income 16-18 year olds to encourage them to stay in school or college), the future of university bursaries, not to mention the wider reforms and cuts being made by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government across the whole welfare state.

We might have lost the vote, but the student movement has already won in mobilising a united, broad and national movement, that brings together students, workers and academics from across the country. No police violence which attempts to stop our democratic right to peaceful protest will discourage us from protesting.

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