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Britain, anti-racist mobilization

# London says 'fuck the police'

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**There have been Black Lives Matter demonstrations - in solidarity with the movement in the USA and also denouncing institutional racism at home - in cities throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland North and South. This report is on the one in London on 3 June.**

To keep social distancing, I'd decided to cycle to the BLM protest on Wednesday. Turns out if you leave your bike in the elements for six months, it doesn't work too well.

One flat tire and an uncooperative rusted chain later, I squeaked and clattered into Hyde Park 45 minutes late, expecting to nod solidarity to a few stragglers after a small but worthy expression of support with the US uprising.

I was very wrong. People were still flooding in. Streams of young Londoners - no out of town coaches for this - cardboard placards, 'BLM' and 'Justice of George Floyd' carefully inked in, largely held aloft without even supporting sticks.

It wasn't until I got through the trees and into the open, on the north side of the park, that I had any sense of the size. From the distance, I guessed somewhere in the thousands. Closer, I revised it upwards to the tens of thousands. Very big for something that has been organised on short notice with little resource, and at a time when many people won't or can't gather collectively.

Most were under 30, and I reckon more than 80% were under 40. This was a young crowd, and as ethnically diverse as is working-class London. Among the cardboard placards were a few Palestinian and LGBT pride flags, plus the occasional bedsheet that had been sacrificed for a makeshift banner. Nothing professionally printed, with the exception of one Justice for Belly Mujinga banner - the London Transport worker who died from covid-19 after being spat at by someone claiming to have the virus, and whose death the police are refusing to investigate. [1]

There were speakers somewhere - Star Wars actor John Boyega was one - but I have no idea where they were speaking from. I hung around the periphery, in the vain hope of maintaining some kind of social distancing. Even further out were the cops, who were really socially distanced.

## Taking the knee

At one point, everyone took the knee and gave a clenched-fisted salute.

The crowd started to head off out of the park and down Park Lane, so I wheeled my rusty old bike along. Clearly, social distancing was not going to be a thing. Chants of 'Say his name: George Floyd', 'No justice, no peace, no racist police,' and 'Fuck the police' (if streaming of the [NWA classic](#) doesn't spike, there really is no justice). And the occasional 'Fuck Boris'. Which is perhaps a little unfair, as there were loads of Boris Bikes, weaving in and out of the crowd. [2]

Knots of police moved in to flank the demo in groups of about 20. Not tooled up riot-style - although the [Territorial Support Group](#) was there - and not enough to shut things down if it had turned against them. They were occasionally jeered - 'fuck the police' and 'shame' - but largely ignored. I've been demonstrating against all sorts of shit for

decades, and I've never seen a march so lightly policed. Seems like you don't need them to maintain order. Who knew? Which rather begs the question, what are they there for?

We streamed into Parliament Square. I figured this was the familiar demonstrators' short jaunt through central London. But no - while some hung around on the green, the main body of the march headed westwards past Parliament, then wheeled south across the Thames. 'Where are we going?' I asked a man of about 20 walking next to me. 'We did this on Monday,' he said. 'American embassy in Vauxhall.' He'd been on the march two days previously, and that's the route it had taken. 'Took about three minutes for the whole march to get past me then,' he added. This was a lot bigger - I watched it file past me for a good half hour, without seeing the end.

We circled round Vauxhall, going nowhere near the embassy. He shrugged. I asked others - no one knew where we were headed. Nor were there any obvious stewards to ask. I could have asked a copper, but I do have some pride.

We got to Kennington, a cacophony of horns blaring in support: clenched fists out of bus and van drivers' windows, people holding their small kids up to the balconies of flats and waving.

## Bollard oratory

I made it to the front, expecting a line of organisers, stewards and the occasional celeb carrying one of those long, chest-high banners that are a must for any self-respecting demo these days. But the front was just whoever walked fastest. Boris Bikes were thickest here. Every so often, someone would shout to stop and wait for the rest of the march to catch up. So we would. Someone - anyone, apparently - would climb on a bollard, hang off traffic lights and lead a chant or make a speech while we waited for the rest of the march to catch up... and then off we'd head again.

The march hit Brixton just before half-five. Brixton went ballistic - more horns, cheers, waves. There are going to be a lot of 250 and 109 buses whose horns have been reduced to a deflated 'parp' as a result of overuse on 3 June.

Under Brixton's twin railway bridges, past the tube. I got to Lambeth town hall, looked round ... and most of the march had disappeared. 'Where's it gone?' I asked a woman with a cardboard BLM placard. 'Finished,' she said, looking at me like I was simple (word gets around), 'That's it.'

And so it was. No speeches, no rally - all done at Hyde Park, plus any promising looking traffic islands on the way. I looked at the rusted chain on my bike and contemplated the long cycle home.

## The vanishing Labour show

So, here's a thing: this was a radical, anti-establishment demo. I'll give you dollars to doughnuts that most of the people on that demo old enough to vote, voted Labour six months ago. But where was the labour movement? No union or Labour Party banners. No evidence of the left in general - a mixed blessing, to be fair. Former shadow cabinet member Barry Gardiner [tweeted](#) that he'd broken weeks of isolation to attend. Gardiner's a funny fish - ex-Blair cabinet, Modi flatterer on the one hand; pugilist for Corbyn on the other - but if he's too good for Sir Keir and rocked up on the day, good on him. There were certainly others, but labour movement profile was so low as to be subterranean.

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It does say something about the nature of the Corbynite left - largest party in Europe, yadda-yadda - that it is entirely invisible on something as significant as this. That Sir Keir keeps this movement at a respectful distance also says a lot about what the party has so quickly reverted to.

But enough of that.

What wasn't there was the left. What was there was a lot of young working class people, many with their own experience of police repression, who felt what had happened to George Floyd personally and viscerally. Protest organiser Akira, quoted in the Guardian, made the link: "We have institutional racism in the UK, and we have police brutality in the UK, but we are looking at this like it's an American problem and Britain has struggled with this for a long time." [3]

The two days between the Monday and Wednesday demonstrations saw a massive increase in numbers, off the back of huge anger and empathy. Let's hope - and help - it grows and organises further.

4 June 2020

Source [Time to Mutiny](#).

PS:

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[1] See [JUSTICE FOR BELLY MUJINGA](#).

[2] Boris bikes - introduced under Boris Johnson, current prime minister when he was mayor of London 2008-16 - are "pick it up drop it off" public hire bikes.

[3] *The Guardian*, 3 June 2020 "[Thousands gather in London for George Floyd protest](#)".