# Police Ombudsman launches investigation into Belfast arrests of pro-Palestine activists amid wider crackdown



The arrest of two pro-Palestine activists in Belfast has sparked significant controversy, prompting an investigation by the Police Ombudsman. Sue Pentel, 72, and Martine McCullough, 56, were taken into custody on May 24 outside a Barclays Bank branch in Castle Place on suspicion of criminal damage. This incident unfolded during a protest where activists allegedly affixed stickers advocating for a boycott of the bank upon an ATM.

Both Pentel and McCullough have since expressed their dismay over the arrests, labelling them as “ridiculous” and “out of proportion.” Their detainment has raised questions regarding the boundaries of peaceful protest in Northern Ireland. The PSNI defended the actions taken during the protest, describing the arrests as "lawful and proportionate." According to their statement, the women were released later that same day but were reported to the Public Prosecution Service, a move that often accompanies such allegations.

The Police Ombudsman confirmed that an independent investigation into the incident is now underway, following a review of substantial evidence, including body-worn camera footage. This response has garnered support from various human rights advocates. Patrick Corrigan, Northern Ireland director of Amnesty International, welcomed the investigation, asserting, “People must have the right to peacefully express their views without fear of arbitrary arrest or other disproportionate responses by the police.”

The principle of freedom of expression and assembly is enshrined in law, emphasising the rights of individuals to engage in peaceful protest. A spokesperson for the PSNI reiterated this commitment but highlighted the necessity of balancing such freedoms with public safety and the need to maintain order in urban environments. This difficult equilibrium has become increasingly contentious in light of various protests across the UK, where the response of law enforcement has come under scrutiny.

In a broader context, this incident reflects a troubling trend regarding the treatment of pro-Palestinian activists in the UK, especially in light of recent events. Activists across the country have reported what they perceive as an increasing criminalisation of peaceful protests. For instance, in August 2024, a group of pro-Palestinian activists was arrested under organised crime laws after demonstrating at an arms factory in Kent. This marked the first application of such laws against protesters in the UK, leading to widespread condemnation and fears regarding potential overreach by police.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission has demanded an end to what they describe as the unlawful arrests of pro-Palestinian protesters, urging authorities to respect the right to free expression as outlined under the Human Rights Act. Recent data from the CIVICUS Monitor also indicates a rise in police tactics described as heavy-handed, with reports of excessive force and racial profiling at pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

Within this climate, concerns have been raised about the ability of activists to safely express dissent regarding Israel's policies. The potential for punitive measures against those participating in such protests has fostered a chilling effect on public discourse and activism.

As the investigation into the Belfast arrests unfolds, many will be watching closely, hoping for a resolution that upholds the rights of individuals to peacefully assemble and express dissent without fear of retribution.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/06/uk-police-arrest-two-pro-palestine-activists-under-organised-laws)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/), [[4]](https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-releases/ihrc-demands-end-to-unlawful-arrests-of-pro-palestine-protestors/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/increasing-restrictions-on-civic-freedoms-excessive-force-racial-profiling-and-restrictive-laws-target-pro-palestine-protesters/), [[6]](https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/12/11/xndp-d11.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/12/11/xndp-d11.html), [[7]](https://www.phoenix-law.org/qub-protestors-make-complaint-to-police-ombudsman/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/police-ombudsman-to-investigate-arrest-of-two-pro-palestine-activists-in-belfast-6QTUDYMTARESBCCXC2GNX6NRZE/> - The Police Ombudsman is set to investigate the arrest of two pro-Palestine activists, Sue Pentel (72) and Martine McCullough (56), who were detained on May 24 outside Barclays Bank in Belfast on suspicion of criminal damage. The arrests occurred during a protest where stickers calling for a boycott of the bank were allegedly placed on an ATM. Both women have criticised their arrests as 'ridiculous' and 'out of proportion'. The PSNI defended the arrests as 'lawful and proportionate', stating that both women were released the same day and reported to the Public Prosecution Service for criminal damage. The Police Ombudsman confirmed an independent investigation into the incident, following a review of substantial material, including body-worn video. Patrick Corrigan, Northern Ireland director of Amnesty International, welcomed the announcement, emphasising the right to peacefully express views without fear of arbitrary arrest. A PSNI spokesperson reiterated the fundamental human rights to freedom of speech and assembly, while balancing the need to protect public health and safety.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/06/uk-police-arrest-two-pro-palestine-activists-under-organised-laws> - Two pro-Palestine activists were arrested in August 2024 under organised crime laws following a direct action protest at the Instro Precision arms factory in Sandwich, Kent. This marked the first known use of section 45 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 against protesters in the UK. The activists were detained over their roles in a Palestine Action protest two months prior. Lawyers and human rights groups have denounced the use of organised crime laws against protesters, arguing that such measures are intended to target serious criminal activity, not peaceful demonstrations. The incident has raised concerns about the potential for increased criminalisation of protest activities in the UK.
4. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-releases/ihrc-demands-end-to-unlawful-arrests-of-pro-palestine-protestors/> - The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) has called for an end to the unlawful arrests of pro-Palestinian protesters in the UK. In a letter to the Metropolitan Police Chief, Sir Mark Rowley, the IHRC highlighted the arrest of a protester at Trafalgar Square on October 6, 2024, for allegedly chanting 'Israel is a terrorist state'. The IHRC argues that such arrests infringe upon the right to freedom of expression under the Human Rights Act 1998 and have raised concerns about the increasing politicisation of policing in response to government figures condemning and demonising protesters.
5. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/increasing-restrictions-on-civic-freedoms-excessive-force-racial-profiling-and-restrictive-laws-target-pro-palestine-protesters/> - The CIVICUS Monitor reports on increasing restrictions on civic freedoms targeting pro-Palestinian protesters in the UK. The report highlights incidents of excessive force, racial profiling, and the use of restrictive laws against protesters. It documents disproportionate police responses characterised by racial profiling and Islamophobia, questioning the necessity and proportionality of increased police measures during public demonstrations. The report raises concerns about the impact on the right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression.
6. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/12/11/xndp-d11.html> - The World Socialist Web Site reports on the arrest of four pro-Palestinian protesters, three of whom were Queen’s University Belfast students, following a peaceful attempt to unfurl a Palestinian flag during a visit by Hillary Clinton. Social media footage shows protesters being thrown to the ground, dragged by their ankles, and hit with batons by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Despite the peaceful nature of the protest, three individuals have been charged with resisting police, obstruction, and assault, and are due in court. The Queen’s University Palestine Assembly has demanded that all charges be withdrawn and criticised the PSNI's actions and the university's response.
7. <https://www.phoenix-law.org/qub-protestors-make-complaint-to-police-ombudsman/> - Three Queen’s University Belfast students arrested during a pro-Palestine protest on November 14, 2024, have lodged a formal complaint with the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. The protest occurred during a visit by Hillary Clinton, where protesters attempted to unfurl a Palestinian flag. Videos of the protest show several people being arrested by officers. The students, who have been charged with resisting police, obstruction, and assault, deny the charges and have raised concerns about the lawfulness of the police actions. Their legal representatives are assembling all relevant media and social media footage from the event.