



UK Protest Activity and Civil Unrest

A G4S Academy Briefing Paper
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The UK experiences frequent protests covering a range of issues from domestic and international political issues to environmental concerns and economic pressures. Organised strikes and marches are often held over economic issues such as cuts to public services and pay disputes. Strike action is particularly common, mainly in public services such as education and transport, due to the current cost of living crisis.

The majority of protest events remain peaceful and attract a small attendance, with protesters restricted in their movements due to heightened security measures in place. Although incidents of violent protest activity are rare during protests in the UK, events involving the far-right and counter-protests over controversial political issues can escalate. Significant levels of police resources are often deployed to ensure disruption is minimised.

Levels of protest activity and civil unrest are assessed to have decreased over the past year. However, according to G4S data, the threat of civil unrest, including protest activity and strike action, will continue to pose a threat to UK industries over the long term. There is likely to be a rise in climate activism with the intent and capabilities to target government institutions and financial sector companies, particularly in London. Furthermore, strike action across multiple sectors of the UK, including healthcare, education and transport, will continue to be driven by the high cost of living.

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Figure 1: Protest activity and civil unrest in the UK over the past 12 months. Source: ACLED

G4S monitoring and ACLED data indicates a decrease of large-scale protest events over the past 12 months. However, there is an increasing trend of protesters, largely affiliated to environmental activist groups, using organised disruptive tactics, such as lock-on devices and paint to conduct protests in London and across the wider UK. There is also a growing capability of threat actors to covertly deploy individuals or small teams at events to conduct a visible protest by breaching heightened security measures. The willingness of protesters to target fuel depots, supply chains and transport infrastructure will likely have a disproportionate impact on retailers, especially those selling perishable goods.

In particular, there is a precedent of climate activist groups to target oil and gas AGMs in the UK over the past 12 months. According to police data, between April and June 2023, protests by climate activist groups cost the Metropolitan Police an estimated GBP 9 million. Protest groups are likely to continue the targeting of political and high-profile events hosted in the UK.

Environmental activist groups

Key environmental activist groups identified in this assessment include:

- **Extinction Rebellion (XR)**
- **Fossil Free London (FFL)**
- **Just Stop Oil (JSO)**
- **Greenpeace UK**

JSO conducted a 13-week long protest campaign between April and July 2023 to highlight issues of climate change. The group held daily slow-march protests across central London, causing significant levels of disruption to transport across the city and costing the police over GBP 7.7 million. JSO activists also disrupted high profile events including the Chelsea Flower Show, BBC Proms, London Pride, Wimbledon Tennis Championships, the Gallagher Premiership Rugby Final, the British Open, and World Snooker Championship. Activists continue to stage sporadic protests in major cities. In August 2023, JSO supporters held slow-march protests in Leeds and Exeter:

Climate protests have also previously targeted government buildings. On 30th September 2023, over 200 protesters, led by FFL, conducted a protest at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero office in central London against the government's approval for the Rosebank offshore oil field development. The protest formed part of a series of protests across the UK, including outside the UK Government building in Edinburgh, to denounce the development. The building was previously targeted in July 2023 by JSO protesters, who covered the building in orange paint to demand the government immediately halt all new licences and consents for new oil, gas, and coal projects.



Figure 2: JSO supporters conduct a slow-march protest in London, 19 July 2023. Source: JSO

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There is an increased risk of protest activity targeting large companies in the oil and gas industry. In February 2023, protest activity by Greenpeace UK activists targeted Shell headquarters in London after the company revealed a record of GBP 32.2 billion in annual profits. Significant protest activity continued in April 2023, as climate activist groups, including XR and JSO, protested outside Shell's Head Office in London during a four-day climate protest event, which attracted over 100,000 demonstrators over the four-day period and cost the Metropolitan Police a reported GBP 917,000.

In May 2023, XR and FFL activists disrupted the Barclays' AGM in London, while XR and sub-group XR Money Rebellion disrupted HSBC's AGM in Birmingham. Over 25 FFL protesters were also arrested after attempts to disrupt BP's AGM in London, despite heightened security measures, including metal detectors and security searches.

In October 2023, FFL and Greenpeace activists also conducted protest activity outside the InterContinental Hotel on Park Lane, London. The protest attempted to block access to the hotel, where oil executives were meeting for the Energy Intelligence Forum, a three-day conference event. Police arrested 27 people during the protest and the incident received widespread international media coverage due to the arrest of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Climate protests have also targeted businesses in other sectors, including global companies such as Amazon. In 2021, XR activists blocked access to Amazon's largest UK warehouse, located in Dunfermline. The protest was held over the company's alleged exploitative and environmentally destructive business practices, as well as their reported disregard for workers' rights over company profits. The group also targeted sites in other UK locations, including Manchester, Peterborough, Bristol, and Milton Keynes, among others.



Figure 3: Police arrest Greta Thunberg at protest in London, 17 October 2023. Source: Reuters

Disruptive protest activity continues to target global business in the UK. On 18 October 2023, protesters occupied insurance offices in London, demanding that they rule out insuring the proposed West Cumbria coal mine and the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). Three high-profile buildings were targeted by the activists, who occupied the offices of Ascot, Talbot, Chaucer, Markel, Allied World, CNA Hardy, Tokio Marine Kiln, Sirius International, and Lancashire Syndicates. Some activists glued themselves to the floor while others staged a sit-in, refusing to leave the premises.

Political protest activity

Politically motivated protest activity varies significantly in scale and intensity across the UK. Whilst the majority of protests over the past 24 months took place in London, certain protest themes are known to attract increased support in other areas of the UK, including Glasgow, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, and Brighton.

There is an increased risk of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian demonstrations, with the potential for violent unrest, over the immediate term due to the ongoing conflict in Israel and the Palestine Territories. On 21 October, around 100,000 people participated in a pro-Palestine protest in London, led by the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, to demand an immediate ceasefire in the ongoing conflict in Israel and the Palestine Territories. While the protest remained largely peaceful, there were reports of pro-Hamas chants made by supporters of the Islamic fundamentalist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. The demonstration took place amid a rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents. Between 1 and 18 October 2023, Metropolitan Police in London reported a 1,350 percent increase in hate crimes against Jewish people, with 31 reported attacks on Jewish property, including businesses and restaurants, and online threats made against schools and universities. Police have heightened security measures across London and other cities in the UK to provide reassurance to Jewish communities. Police also reported a 140 percent increase in Islamophobic offences.

There is an increased threat of protest activity in the UK by pro-Khalistan and Indian nationalist groups amid an escalating diplomatic row after allegations made by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the involvement of the Indian government in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023. On 2 October, pro-Khalistan supporters staged a demonstration outside the Indian High Commission in London. The protest was heavily policed following incidents of violent unrest in March 2023, when pro-Khalistan protesters removed the Indian flag from the High Commission.

Strike Action

There has been a significant increase in strike activity since unions launched a series of actions since December 2022, affecting a variety of sectors including education, transport and medical services. The biggest day of industrial action since the current wave of strikes began took place on 15 March 2023, as Chancellor Jeremy Hunt revealed his spring budget. Strikes have been conducted across the UK by teachers, junior doctors, journalists, university lecturers, civil servants, rail workers, London Underground staff, bus drivers, and security guards.

Strike action by rail workers affiliated with the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union continued on 4 and 6 October as part of an ongoing pay dispute. Up to 16 train operators were affected during strike action, with significant disruptions to train services, including delays and cancellations. Strike action by junior doctors and consultants represented by the British Medical Association (BMA) also continued in a three-day strike across England, beginning on 2 October, causing significant and prolonged disruption to non-emergency healthcare services.

However, there is a reduced risk of strikes by teachers over the short term after the National Education Union (NEU) and other educational unions in England accepted the government's offer of a 6.5 percent pay rise in July. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) also halted further industrial action and cancelled by London Underground staff in October.

The impact of protest activity and civil unrest on businesses can be significant. Protesters can cause minor disruption to planned events and also directly target businesses, with the aim to damage property, occupy business premises, intimidate staff or even injure people associated with an organisation, as well as posing a significant reputational risk.

While activists, groups and demonstrators often coordinate events with authorities and share information about upcoming actions on social media, in order to maximise support during protests, sporadic and spontaneous protests do occur. The threat of protest activity and civil unrest against businesses is also highly dependent on the participating individuals, group, or groups, as different protest groups adopt different protest tactics.

Climate activists groups often conduct low-level vandalism of business premises or blockade roads in central areas, whereas political protests groups, particularly those attended by right-wing or extremist groups over inflammatory political issues, are more likely to escalate into violence due to the presence of counter-protesters and clashes with police cannot be ruled out.

In particular, further disruptive protest activity by climate activists against major UK industry events and office locations is likely over the long term. A popular technique used in recent protests against major oil and gas companies includes individuals buying shares in major oil and gas companies to gain access to AGM events. This tactic broadens potential risk of protest activity at AGM events to include shareholders, as well as external protest groups.

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