

Anti-war protests in Australian cities

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20 October 2001

Anti-war protests took place in a number of Australian cities last weekend reflecting concerns among wider layers of the population about the implications of the US bombardment of Afghanistan and Australian support for it. The largest protest took place in Sydney on October 13, when around 3,000 people marched from the Town Hall through the centre of the city to Martin Place, where speakers addressed the crowd.

The rally drew a broad cross-section of people, including professionals and workers with their children along with university and high school students and a layer of older people who had campaigned against the Vietnam War. A diverse range of organisations were involved—radical protest groups, green and environmental associations, student groups, churches and pacifist organisations.

Members of the city's Afghani community distributed flowers in a call for peace and carried banners condemning both the September 11 terror attack on the US and the Bush administration's response. An Afghan Australian detailed to the rally the horrific consequences the bombing would have on the country after more than 20 years of war and under conditions of severe food shortages.

Young people carried placards denouncing the bombing of the Afghani people as answering terrorism with more terrorism. Others had hand-made signs reading "No War, Global Equity" and "Unite for Peace". Banners called for the lifting of sanctions against Iraq and opposing any commitment of Australian military personnel to the war. While speakers condemned the war, their perspective was limited to calling for bigger protests to pressure the Howard government.

In Melbourne, over 1,000 people assembled at the Arts Centre and marched on the US Consulate. An estimated 1,500 protested in Adelaide and 500 in Perth.

On October 14, women's groups organised a rally of 500 in Melbourne, demonstrating against the persecution of Muslim women in the weeks since the terror attack.

The protests last weekend followed several on October 9, when hundreds of people assembled in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities immediately after the commencement of US strikes.

Earlier, on October 6, more than 2,500 people marched in Brisbane. Originally planned as an anti-globalisation rally at the British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the Brisbane protest was transformed in a demonstration against the looming attack on Afghanistan. CHOGM was postponed after a number of government leaders, including the British and Indian prime ministers, announced it was unlikely they would attend.

In line with a virtual blackout in the Australian media of any dissenting views, there has been very little coverage of any of the anti-war protests. Last weekend's Sydney rally, for instance, was briefly reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, but not in either of Sydney's two daily newspapers.

A common theme in the rallies has been opposition to the racist attacks taking place against Australia's Arabic and Muslim communities.

In Melbourne, the Equal Opportunity Commission has recorded 50 physical assaults on Muslims and Arabs. The Islamic Council of Victoria has reported two cases of rape and the stabbing of a Middle Eastern boy while at school. Sheik Fouad Nachar from a Melbourne mosque told *news.com.au*: "We live in fear here. People try to assault us in markets, streets and in shopping centres."

Islamic communities are maintaining 24-hour guard on their mosques, schools and facilities due to a wave of arson and vandal attacks. On September 22, a temporary mosque in the Brisbane suburb of Kurbay

was firebombed and burnt to the ground. Another Brisbane mosque, in the suburb of Holland, has also been bombed. On October 11, arsonists attempted to burn down a mosque in Adelaide, causing \$20,000 damage. In Sydney, threats have been made against the large Lakemba mosque and an arson attempt was made on the Auburn mosque.

Tensions are particularly acute in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown where there have been four vandal attacks on mosques in the area as well as the firebombing of six churches. Fear of further racist violence has led to the cancellation of the Bankstown “Arabic Carnival”, a four-week festival celebrating Middle Eastern culture. Executive director of the Australian Arabic Communities Council, Randa Katten, condemned the “general tense atmosphere of anti-Arab sentiments that permeate our lives”.

Prior to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Howard government had already been fuelling racist sentiment through its vilification of refugees and its extraordinary measures to prevent those aboard the Norwegian freighter *Tampa* from landing in Australia. In the wake of September 11, government ministers further stoked up anti-immigrant prejudice by claiming that refugees, particularly from Afghanistan and the Middle East, could be terrorists.



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