Police attack May Day protests in Australia

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In the most recent example of state violence against political protest in Australia, May Day demonstrations in two cities were subjected to police attack last Wednesday. In Sydney, at least 100 demonstrators required medical attention and 31 were arrested.

On May Day morning, over 500 police, including a mounted detachment, were mobilised to break-up a peaceful sit-down protest by approximately 700 supporters of various middle class radical and refugee defence organisations. The protesters were blocking access to the central Sydney headquarters of Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), the company contracted by the federal government to operate its refugee detention centres, where hundreds of so-called illegal refugees are being held in inhumane conditions. Mounted police made two charges into the demonstration, while police on foot dragged away protesters who were sitting on the ground and attacked others trying to assist them.

Independent legal observers saw police violently push a 90-year-old man and throw a young woman face down onto the concrete footpath. Both had to be hospitalised. Observers and protesters also allege that police used illegal chokeholds on numerous people. Dozens of demonstrators suffered cuts and abrasions while being dragged by police along the road or footpath.

The state action was premeditated. While they were not used, detachments of police equipped with batons and pepper spray were on the sidelines in preparation for an even more violent attack and the operation was directed from a helicopter hovering above. A spokesperson for the legal observers, Louise Boon-Kuo, told the media: "An excessive number of police were deployed to break up a peaceful and legitimate protest. From our observations, police actions today were some of the most violent seen in Sydney in recent years."

Police were equally provocative against the May Day protest of some 200 people outside the Department of Immigration building in Brisbane. According to participant accounts on indymedia.org, police violently seized a teenager who had painted slogans on the road. When protesters attempted to prevent a police van taking him away, they were also attacked. According to eyewitnesses, Brisbane police, like their counterparts in Sydney, struck several people in the neck.

The incidents on May Day are not isolated events. Over the past couple of years, the democratic right to engage in political protest has been increasingly undermined by police repression. Last month, police violently assaulted demonstrators outside a number of refugee detention centres. This followed a police attack on last year's "M1" anti-globalisation protest in Sydney, and a series of clashes provoked by the authorities at the "S11" anti-globalisation demonstration in Melbourne in 2000. Every major political demonstration—against the NATO assaults on Yugoslavia, against Israel's invasion of the West Bank—has been shadowed by hundreds of police, including officers equipped with riot gear. At the meeting of Commonwealth heads of state in Brisbane last March, the Queensland and Federal governments deployed over 4,000 police and 2,100 military personnel to prevent protesters getting anywhere near the event.

Across the country, state governments have been conducting "law-and-order" campaigns to justify a build-up of police numbers, powers and presence on the streets. In New South Wales, the Carr Labor government has used false or exaggerated claims of gang violence and growing crime to introduce draconian new laws. Unprecedented police sweeps have been made of inner-city and suburban shopping centres, with hundreds of people, mainly working class youth, being stopped and searched.

At the national level, the Howard Liberal government is using the pretext of "counter-terrorism" to introduce legislation that will allow the state to conduct arbitrary detentions and persecute organisations and individuals for their political views. (See: Australian "counter-terrorism" laws threaten fundamental democratic rights)

In what amounted to an open endorsement of the police actions, the NSW Labor Council, the peak trade union body in Australia's most populous state, posted an editorial on its website denouncing the May Day demonstrators as "political extremists" who were "thumbing their noses, not just to authority but to the history of the Australian working class." Yesterday, the official trade union May Day rally in Sydney attracted only 1,000 people—overwhelmingly union officials and elderly ex-members of various Stalinist organisations. In Melbourne, Australia's major industrial city, fewer than 500 people took part.

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