

Australia: Police arrest student antiwar demonstrators

Our correspondents
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More than 10,000 Australian high school, Technical and Further Education and university students demonstrated across the country yesterday against the US-led war on Iraq. An estimated 5,000 students rallied in Sydney, 2,000 in Melbourne, 1,000 in both Perth and Adelaide, up to 800 in Brisbane, and 300 in Hobart. Students burned US flags and effigies of Australian Prime Minister John Howard and US President Bush and angrily demanded Australian troops be withdrawn from Iraq.

In a clear attempt to intimidate the students, police arrested 56 protestors, some as young as 11-years-old, the largest number since the antiwar protests erupted early this year. In all, 33 students were arrested in Sydney, with 14 charged and 19 issued infringements notices, 18 were arrested in Perth and five in Brisbane. Large contingents of special operations and mounted police were present at all the demonstrations.

Police began harassing Middle Eastern students at the Sydney Town Hall rallying point after 1 p.m. yesterday, provoking an altercation between a handful of students and the police. Heavy-handed police tactics continued throughout the afternoon, culminating in mounted police and special operations group officers hemming-in 300 students outside Howard's Sydney office. Police refused to allow the students, many quite young, to leave the area for two hours. Several were arrested in clashes with police.

In a clear attack on democratic rights, senior NSW police later said they would not issue a permit for a student antiwar protest planned in Sydney next week. Rally organisers, however, have said they will go ahead with the demonstration, with or without a police permit.

Predictably the Murdoch-owned media denounced the demonstrators. The *Australian* headlined its story "Mayhem not war as kids riot for peace," while a *Daily*

Telegraph editorial called for the "full force of the law" to be used against those arrested. The right-wing tabloid, which is notorious for its racist witchhunting of Middle Eastern youth, described those charged as "extremists", "fools", "hoons", "agitators" and "thugs".

Notwithstanding the exaggerated media portrayal, the Sydney demonstration was largely peaceful, with the deeply felt anger of the students expressed through singing, dancing and chanting antiwar slogans.

After brief impromptu speeches by students at Town Hall voicing their outrage over the war, the rally moved to nearby Hyde Park where many speakers drew the connection between education cuts and rising war expenditure. One speaker was cheered when he said the decision to go to war was made by politicians who obtained their university degrees "for free". Some of the loudest applause, however, was reserved for those criticising the mass media.

As well as the popular "No Blood for Oil" signs, students carried hand-made placards with pictures of civilian victims from the Vietnam War. Others read: "Why Kill Children? What Have They Done??" and "How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?"

High school students, many still in uniform, dominated the Melbourne demonstration. They came from Our Lady of Sion College, as well as Preston Girls, Footscray City, Lakeside, Reservoir District and Glen Waverly secondary colleges, and Northcote, Strathmore and other high schools. A contingent of over 200 public sector workers joined the rally.

Banners included: "What's so smart about bombing a school and hospital?" "We learnt not to fight in kindergarten", "Anything war can do peace can do better", "How many gallons of blood?" and "This is not your world Bush, it's ours."

Students heard speakers at the State Library before marching to parliament where they were addressed by several union officials and a Gulf War veteran who has returned his medals in protest over the invasion of Iraq. Students gave a series of passionate impromptu speeches.

While rally organisers claimed there was an “open microphone,” they attempted to stop Socialist Equality Party member Mauricio Saavedra from addressing students.

Eventually allowed to speak, Saavedra told students that the slaughter of the Iraqi people would “go down in history as one of the greatest crimes of the 21st century”. “This is an imperialist war,” he said, “a war to secure natural resources and make Iraq a military protectorate. But the war in Iraq will not stop there. Who will be next: North Korea, Colombia, Iran, China or Russia?”

He urged students to examine the lessons of history. “There are historical precedents for this US-led imperialist war and that is Nazi Germany... This opened the way for the Second World War. Today the United States is preparing for the same conditions, that is another third world war.”

Saavedra was warmly applauded, with many students carefully listening to the only serious elaboration of the issues confronting the antiwar movement.

At least 1,000 students, youth, workers and pensioners rallied in the Perth Cultural Centre’s amphitheatre before marching on the US consulate. The exuberant protest heard several speakers, including Aboriginal activist Clarrie Isaacs, musician Matthew Butler and National Union of Students (NUS) state president Zaneta Mascarenhas.

Banners on display included: “Are we a democracy or a tyranny? Howard listen to the people”, “War kills children” and “Precision Bombs and Surgical Strikes = Innocent Deaths”. A delegation of about 50 Islamic college students received warm cheers on their arrival.

Mascarenhas told the demonstration: “The Howard government has spent \$30.4 billion on the military. How much on education? A measly \$6 billion and 6,000 students did not get a university place in Western Australia this year. They don’t want to put more money into education. They want to spend money on killing innocent human beings.”

Butler, who sang a number of protest songs, told the

crowd: “It’s OK to burn human flesh with bombs but you can’t burn a flag”—a reference to recent media attacks on two youth who burnt an Australian flag at a rally last month and were arrested by police.

In **Brisbane**, the Queensland state capital, some 800 students marched through the central business district protesting outside Boeing and Australian Immigration offices. However the demonstrators, some as young as 12, were prevented by police from marching to Parliament House.

In **Adelaide**, South Australia, students marched to the Murdoch-owned *Advertiser* newspaper to denounce its support for the war and rallied outside the offices of Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer and Defence Minister Robert Hill. Students lay down across a major city intersection, drawing chalk outlines of their bodies to symbolise the Iraqi civilians being killed by the US-led invasion.



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