

Protesters rally in Melbourne, Australia after police violence

Will Morrow
31 October 2011

An estimated 1,500 people marched last Saturday in Melbourne as part of the international Occupy movement against social inequality. The protest was called to re-establish an occupation site after police brutally assaulted demonstrators, arrested about 100 people and dismantled the encampment at City Square on October 21.

Large numbers of police gathered again on Saturday in a provocative show of force, and protesters were barred from establishing a new occupation in central Melbourne's Treasury Gardens.

Several hundred people rallied at 12 p.m. outside the State Library of Victoria, before marching toward Treasury Gardens. By the time they reached the site, more than 1,500 people had joined in the protest. More than one hundred police, several mounted on horseback, skirted the march. Police had warned the protesters from the outset that they would not allow anyone to set up camp and would arrest anyone who tried to inhibit police from taking down camping equipment.

Melbourne City Council distributed leaflets informing protesters that any camps at Treasury Gardens would be illegal, citing by-laws against tying structures near trees or damaging the gardens.

Protesters eventually moved to RMIT university and attempted to establish a camp there. Police on horseback provocatively covered exits to the university, while more than a dozen plainclothes officers moved into the crowd and videotaped protesters. Eventually a small group of about 30 people returned to the State Library and slept overnight in cold and wet conditions.

The threatening response to the protests came just over a week after the police attack on the City Square protest site (see: "Australian police attack Melbourne protest"). The continued harassment and threats against the Occupy protest is being coordinated by the city council, headed by Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, with Victorian Liberal state Premier Ted Baillieu. Behind them stands the Greens-backed minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The Labor government is acting at the behest of big business to restructure key sectors of industry, including manufacturing and retail, in order to maintain Australian capitalism's international "competitiveness" by driving down workers' wages and conditions.

Pseudo-left political parties, several claiming to be socialist, are attempting to direct the Occupy movement into safe political channels, blocking the emergence of any challenge to the Gillard government by tying it to the trade unions.

Steve Jolly, a member of the inner-city Yarra Council, addressed protesters at Treasury Gardens on behalf of the Socialist Party that he leads and as a delegate of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). He glorified a resolution advanced by the union's Victorian secretary, Bill Oliver, "to slam Robert Doyle, to slam the Victoria police for the eviction of City Square eight days ago" and to provide logistical support to the Occupy protest. These empty statements commit the CFMEU officials to nothing, while their "left" supporters like Jolly use them to promote the union bureaucracy, preying on the political naiveté and inexperience of the mostly young participants in the Occupy movement.

The trade unions have played a key role in working with big business and finance capital to undermine workers' wages and conditions over the past three

decades. The union bureaucracy comprises a privileged upper middle-class layer, whose social interests are diametrically opposed to those of workers and students.

The pseudo-left forces that are seeking to tie the Occupy movement to the trade union apparatus are consciously seeking to prop up the ruling Labor Party. While Jolly and others issue occasional “radical” condemnations of capitalism in the course of the Occupy Melbourne protests, none of them ever mention the Gillard government, the political representative of the corporate and financial elite. This is due to the near universal hostility and contempt with which the young people involved in the protests regard the government. Unable to openly promote the Labor Party, the pseudo-left instead strenuously promote illusions in the government’s key props—the trade unions and the Greens—as a means of blocking the emergence of an independent, revolutionary movement of the working class.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of protesters on Saturday.

Joni, a mature-aged student in politics and history at Victoria University, and originally from East Timor, worked making trucks for five years for Iveco before he was retrenched in 2009. “I was an assembly line worker,” he said. “We relied on the union to negotiate our enterprise bargaining agreement. They never organised to defend jobs, but just bargained to get rid of them. The workers were left with nothing but to accept the job cuts.”

When asked about the perspective for the Occupy movement, Joni said: “I think this task is much bigger and more complex than just protest alone.” He continued: “I think the Labor Party is part of this system; they don’t represent the workers. I feel the same with the unions—they also enforce the system and line up with the Labor Party to control the workers.”

Krista had attended the previous rally and witnessed the police crackdown. “I came in when I heard the protesters were given an eviction notice by the police. I couldn’t get down there until about 12 p.m., and couldn’t get into the square, but once we saw people getting dragged out and getting hit, and the tactics of the police and the violence that was going on, I joined a small group that started a secondary protest outside the area ... I got punched in the back of the head by a police

officer when I asked him if this was why he joined the police force, and he replied, ‘yes.’ I’ve got a bruise on my arm from being manhandled and thrown over a car.”

Asked why she had come again this week, Krista said: “I came because I don’t believe our government should be dictated by corporations. Government policy is influenced by people who can afford to pay them off. Democracy is about people being able to have influence over what government policy is and we don’t have that.”

Jessica, a 24-year-old disability support worker, said: “I think the Gillard government is totally corrupt. When it makes cuts to welfare, it doesn’t surprise me. That is how I see governments—they are only here for the one percent and they take away our rights.” Jessica explained she had worked several jobs but was still unable to move out of her parents’ home. She added: “It’s not a real democracy at all. There is only the choice of two parties, and they have the same policies.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact