

Australian protesters denounced as “ugly mob”

Mike Head, Peter Symonds
27 January 2012

A demonstration yesterday in Canberra, the Australian capital, inflamed by the provocative actions of the police in “rescuing” Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, has been used by the media and political establishment to suggest that political protest is illegitimate and potentially dangerous.

Among the media headlines, replicated around the world, were “Wild mob put PM in line of fire” (*Sydney Daily Telegraph*), “Australia Day turns ugly” (*Sydney Morning Herald*), and “Sorry day as PM attacked” (*Hobart Mercury*). Front pages featuring pictures of Gillard being hustled away amid a phalanx of riot police and bodyguards reinforced the message that the prime minister was in physical danger.

What actually happened was quite different. A peaceful demonstration by about 1,000 indigenous people and Occupy protesters took place to mark the 40th anniversary of an Aboriginal land rights tent embassy outside Canberra’s old parliament house. At a nearby restaurant, Gillard and Abbott were jointly involved in a function to mark Australia Day—the anniversary of the date in 1788 that Governor Arthur Phillip landed at Sydney Cove and claimed the continent for Britain.

Earlier in the day, Abbott had made deliberately inflammatory remarks suggesting that it was time to end the tent embassy, as the lot of Aboriginal people had significantly improved. “[Y]es, I think a lot has changed since then and I think it probably is time to move on from that,” he told a journalist.

Abbott’s comments were aired on television and understandably angered protesters. The conditions facing the majority of Aborigines have not improved but worsened over the past four decades. Living standards

have been described as “fourth world”, with over 70 percent of indigenous Australians living in poverty. Indigenous life expectancy is about a decade less than for non-indigenous. The indigenous unemployment rate is 18 percent, or more than three times that for all Australians. Aboriginal Australians make up 2 percent of the Australian population, but 25 percent of its prison population.

Governments, Labor and Coalition alike, are responsible for these appalling conditions. Their policies are now becoming even more regressive. The Northern Territory intervention, begun in 2007 under the Coalition and continued by Labor blamed Aborigines for their plight and imposed draconian measures including welfare management on Aboriginal communities.

Incensed by Abbott’s remarks, around 100 to 200 protesters marched to the Lobby restaurant and some began banging on its glass walls chanting slogans, including “shame Abbott shame” and “shame Gillard shame.” Such is the gulf between both of the major parties and the majority of people that neither Gillard nor Abbott even considered speaking to the protesters and addressing their grievances.

Instead, after about 20 minutes, the security detail deemed the situation a “threat.” The two leaders were rushed out a side door, surrounded by 15 to 20 officers with riot shields, pushing aside protesters, and bundled into the PM’s car. A protester later told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the action had started peacefully, but “the police reaction was brutality; they made out we were criminals of some sort.”

With so-called Aboriginal leaders in the forefront, politicians and the media immediately seized on the

incident to denounce the “violence” of the protesters. Warren Mundine, a former Labor Party national president, called for “the full force of the law” to be used against the participants, particularly the “instigators” of the protest.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda declared that “an aggressive, divisive and frightening protest such as this has no place in debates” about Aboriginal issues. He added: “There were times when those sorts of protests were appropriate. But I think now we need to be able to sit down with people like governments and others and sit around a table, air our differences in a reasonable way and not resort to the things that we’ve seen today.”

Gooda’s comments highlight the class divide within the Aboriginal community. While many indigenous people live in abject poverty, a thin, privileged stratum of officials, academics and entrepreneurs have been cultivated over the past 40 years to defuse mounting indigenous anger. They are the only ones who have benefited from the “land rights,” “native title” and “affirmative action” programs adopted since the early 1970s.

These Aboriginal leaders base themselves on the reactionary politics of black identity, blaming “whites” not capitalism for the social crisis confronting indigenous people. Yet government measures trialled on Aboriginal people, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class, are invariably extended to other sections of workers. Labor is expanding the “welfare quarantining” tested during the NT intervention to major working class areas across Australia.

The significance of the vitriolic media campaign against the Canberra protest goes well beyond the Aboriginal community, however. It immediately provided a pretext for chorus of commentary suggesting that extra police resources and legal measures were necessary to prepare for future protests.

In its editorial today, the *Australian* said “the sight of the Prime Minister being bundled away by security personnel from angry protesters” was “disturbing.” The newspaper called for “bipartisan distaste” to be expressed about this “ugly retreat” on Australia Day. After paying lip service to the right to protest, the editorial declared that the demonstrators yesterday were “unarguably in the

wrong when it came to the manner of their protest.”

Referring to Gillard’s “distress”, the *Australian* insisted that the question was not “whether actual violence occurs or not” but rather whether a demonstration is intimidatory and triggers “personal vulnerability at the highest levels of our democracy.” In other words, it is basically illegitimate for the public to stage a demonstration in the presence of any member of the political elite.

The Sydney-published *Daily Telegraph* issued an editorial titled “Diminished by a mob of hooligans”. It absurdly suggested that yesterday’s events suggested that Australia’s political leaders could no longer be assured of the “relatively relaxed circumstances” regarding their security and may need to take US-style cautionary measures. “This is a proper and understandable reaction to what is obviously an enhanced level of risk,” it concluded.

These remarks reflect the deep fear within the Australian ruling elite that the deepening social chasm between rich and poor will give rise to angry protests by working people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. Already there are growing signs of resistance among workers to the sweeping restructuring measures being imposed and accelerating mass layoffs amid a worsening global economic crisis.

The international media also promoted the Gillard “security scare.” The footage of Gillard losing her shoe and falling to the ground in the arms of a burly police agent provided good fodder for the 24-hour news networks. However, the coverage reflected something more politically significant—namely the widespread and growing feeling within ruling circles internationally that they are increasingly under siege and vulnerable to the mass opposition against their regressive economic and social policies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact