

Australian police crackdown on anti-US protest in Sydney

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Hundreds of police in central Sydney last Saturday violently broke up a group of Muslims who joined worldwide protests against the publication of a rabidly anti-Islamic video on the Internet. The media and political establishment followed the police operation with a frenzied campaign denouncing the “violence” of the protesters and demanding anti-democratic measures aimed at criminalising political protest and dissent.

The media coverage has been a blatantly-biased beat-up designed to obscure what actually happened last Saturday and generate a scare campaign about “Muslim extremists.” A large police contingent, including the riot squad and officers with dogs, and supported by a police helicopter, confronted a demonstration of about 500 people marching from Sydney Town Hall. As eyewitnesses have testified, the police initiated the violence. News footage recorded police kicking and punching protesters, and indiscriminately using pepper spray, including near women and children. Two people had to be hospitalised because of police dog bites.

Seven people have been arrested so far, with the police warning of more arrests. Ahmed Elomar, a well-known boxer, has been charged with affray, which carries a maximum sentence of ten years, and denied bail. His lawyer told the court: “He was taken to the ground. While he was on the ground he was kneeed in the back, he was sprayed with pepper spray.”

The media and politicians, however, have focused exclusively on the so-called violence of protesters who came under police attack. A group of young men responded to the police attempt to break up the demonstration by throwing plastic bottles and other objects, and refusing to move. Journalists concentrated

on banners supporting Osama bin Laden and t-shirts worn by protesters calling for jihad.

Completely absent from the commentary has been any reference to the underlying causes of the broad resentment and anger among Muslim communities around the world. The protests are not primarily motivated by the offensive video but by the criminal actions of US imperialism, backed to the hilt by successive Australian governments, in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia over the past two decades. A day after the protest, another eight women were killed in a NATO air strike as part of the ongoing US-led military occupation of Afghanistan.

The government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has been in the forefront of the provocative media coverage. On Monday evening, Leigh Sales, presenter of the ABC’s “7.30” current affairs program, branded the Sydney protest as a “violent and unpredictable Muslim uprising.”

As “evidence” of prior intent to use violence, the program cited text messages that said nothing more than “stop everything, cancel all your plans. Tomorrow town hall 1pm is your calling to rise up and speak up against intentional and deliberate attempts to humiliate the Muslims.”

Neil Fergus, former director of intelligence at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, added to the claims of a conspiracy by declaring that he recognised people at the protest who had been “persons of interest” in 2000.

Labor and Liberal politicians alike have weighed in. Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated: “I absolutely condemn the violence that we saw yesterday... I just

want to say very strongly that this kind of conduct has no place on the streets of our country.” Immigration Minister Chris Bowen foreshadowed the possible deportation of any non-citizens involved in the demonstration.

Right-wing elements of the Liberal opposition, who have a record of whipping up anti-Islamic sentiment, responded with predictable hysteria. A Queensland National Party parliamentarian demanded that a young child, photographed carrying a placard demanding beheadings, be removed from his parents. Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi said the protest was a “wake up call” and railed against any “indulgence of cultural practices that go against our social norms and the two great pillars of Western civilisation—the rule of law and Judeo-Christian values.”

One purpose of this reactionary response is to promote divisive anti-Muslim sentiment and revive the increasingly discredited “war on terror.” The same politicians who are warning of the dangers of “Islamic extremists,” and who used Al Qaeda as the pretext for invading Afghanistan and Iraq, now back the US-led regime-change intervention in Syria that rests on militia organisations connected to Al Qaeda. Erstwhile terrorists become freedom fighters when it proves convenient for Washington’s geostrategic and economic interests in North Africa and the Middle East.

Under the guise of the “war on terror,” successive governments, Labor and Liberal, have enacted a battery of far-reaching laws that undermine basic democratic rights and legal norms. The denunciations of the protest come as the Gillard government is reviewing its anti-terror legislation and preparing even more draconian measures. One proposal involves the establishment of a sweeping surveillance regime to allow intelligence agencies unfettered access to every citizen’s online Internet activity.

Already the protest has been seized on to demand tougher police measures. New South Wales Premier Barry O’Farrell and several journalists have insisted that a high-powered water cannon should have been used against the protesters. Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione responded by declaring that he was

not a “namby pamby” police chief, and reiterating that any future protests would have to be registered and approved by police.

Workers must take a sharp warning from the treatment meted out to last weekend’s demonstration. Amid a worsening global economic crisis, the Australian mining boom is rapidly coming to an end, exacerbating recessionary trends that already exist throughout much of the rest of the Australian economy. Accelerating job losses, sweeping corporate restructuring and deepening cuts to public spending will only intensify social tensions. The strengthening of police and police-state measures is directed at the working class as a whole. In the future it will not be Muslim protesters, but workers defending their jobs and living standards who are denounced as “extremists,” “thugs” and “criminals.”

The official reaction to the Sydney demonstration is just one more sign that the ruling elites are consciously preparing to make any form of political opposition or protest illegitimate and illegal.



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