

Witchhunt intensifies against anti-US protesters in Australia

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Over the past two weeks, the media, political and security establishment in Australia has mounted an escalating campaign to demonise and criminalise Muslim demonstrators who tried to march on the US consulate in Sydney, and then through city streets, on September 16.

Like similar protests around the world, the demonstration was triggered by the anti-Islamic film, *The Innocence of Muslims*, but expressed deeper opposition to the US and its allies, including Australia, which have waged criminal wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, killing tens of thousands of people, and are now intervening in Syria.

The response in Australian ruling circles, as in the US and Europe, has been to defend the anti-Islamic propaganda in the name of free speech, while denying the right to protest against these racist provocations and strengthening the police apparatus.

The most obvious vehicle has been the Murdoch media. Its Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph* has continued to publish prominent photographs of 15 Muslim men allegedly involved in the September 16 protest. It has dubbed them the “faces of rage”, demanding that the police hunt them down and charge them.

What actually happened on September 16 was that a large police contingent, including the riot squad and officers with dogs, confronted about 500 demonstrators. News footage clearly showed the police initiating the violence, kicking and punching protesters, attacking them with pepper spray, setting dogs on them and tackling them to the ground.

Now the police are using video images and mobile phone records to track down everyone who allegedly organised or joined the protest. A police strike force has so far charged eight men and three youth with 25

offences, including assaulting police, affray, rioting, malicious wounding and throwing missiles.

Significantly, traditional “liberal” outlets have joined the witchhunt. On September 27, the *Sydney Morning Herald* front-page headline was: “Rioting youths ‘could be the next terrorists.’” The newspaper directly linked the protesters to terrorism, claiming that “the violent young Muslim men who took part in the Sydney riot two weeks ago could step up to become the next terrorists if they fall under the wrong influences.”

The article featured Australian Federal Police assistant commissioner for counter-terrorism Steve Lancaster, who declared: “Australian jihadis have fought overseas and have the ability to influence young and disaffected men here in Australia.” Without offering any evidence, he asserted: “These people will be looking at the young men in the riots and could seek to recruit those with serious violent tendencies.”

This inflammatory claim demonstrates that, once again, the decade-long “war on terrorism” is being revived as a mechanism for building up the state apparatus, to be used against mounting social and political dissent.

Last weekend, police in both Sydney and Melbourne openly suppressed any further protests, blatantly trampling over basic democratic rights, with the full backing of the state and federal governments.

In Sydney, New South Wales Assistant Police Commissioner Alan Clarke announced that up to 300 extra police would “put a heightened police presence into the CBD.” He said the police were also monitoring social media, “to see if anything is planned for this weekend.” NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell said the extra police had “exerted control”, adding: “I think they’ve told people that this sort of extremism, this sort of violence, is unwelcome in any community.”

Prime Minister Julia Gillard even used her speech to the UN General Assembly on Wednesday to reiterate her Labor government's support for the crackdown, both in Australia and internationally. She declared that Australia was a "multicultural and multi-faith" society, but "our tolerance must never extend to tolerating religious hatred and incitement to violence."

In reality, it is the government and the media that are whipping up religious hatred and inciting violence, through their anti-Muslim witchhunt and Australia's ongoing involvement in the US-led militarism in Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East.

This week, Australian soldiers who had served in Afghanistan posted anti-Islamic comments on Facebook. A soldier allegedly wrote: "Give me a M4 and send to Sydney and I'll do the dishes." Another replied that he wanted to adopt "a stable firing position in the middle of the street and lay waste to every single one of those cancerous f—s."

Army chief David Morrison claimed there was "no place" for such sentiments in the defence force. In reality, this is exactly the kind of racism that is bred by the neo-colonial operations in the Middle East, which have involved soldiers "laying waste" to innocent men, women and children.

The reactionary political logic of the witchhunt of the Sydney protesters was spelled out in a *Daily Telegraph* editorial on September 27. It declared that a "few ugly extremists" had spearheaded "an assault on our whole society". The editorial asserted: "It was an attack on the fundamental principles of a secular democracy in which freedom of expression is a cherished right. That kind of brutal challenge to our very way of life cannot be tolerated under any circumstances, any more than the United Kingdom could tolerate the Nazis or the US the Ku Klux Klan."

Thus, while defending anti-Islam provocations as "freedom of expression", the newspaper openly agitated for the banning of political dissent.

At the same time, the editorial hailed the "Muslim leaders" who "swiftly condemned the minority who marred their religion." In fact, Islamic clerics and Arab community leaders went much further. They collaborated closely with the police, and issued a series of sermons and statements demanding that there be no further demonstrations.

Over the past several decades, the official doctrine of

"multiculturalism" has provided a means of cultivating in immigrant communities a privileged layer of ethnically-based business and religious leaders who have been integrated into the ruling circles. The line-up against the anti-US protests demonstrates the readiness of this religious and ethnic establishment to join the suppression of growing social and political discontent, including in their own communities.

A worsening global economic crisis, sweeping job losses, and rapidly deepening cuts to public spending will only intensify the social tensions. The strengthening of police-state measures is directed at the working class as a whole, not just stigmatised Muslim youth. Beneath a renewed campaign to whip up fears of "extremism" and "terrorism", moves are being made to intimidate and outlaw any form of political opposition or protest.



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