

# Australian “No to racism rallies” silent on Labor and union role

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Several thousand people joined “Say no to racism” demonstrations last Sunday, opposing anti-Islamic and racist “Reclaim Australia” rallies called by extreme right-wing groups in 16 capital and regional cities across the country. The largest turnout was in Melbourne’s Federation Square, where about 2,000 people outnumbered the 500 or so anti-Islam protesters.

Fifteen years of US-led invasions in the Middle East, accompanied by repeated “terrorist” scare campaigns, such as that around last December’s Sydney café siege, and the demonization and repression of refugees by successive governments, both Liberal-National Coalition and Labor, have created the conditions where right-wing nationalist and neo-fascist organisations are raising their heads, exploiting fears whipped up about Islamic immigrants.

Aided by generous publicity in the corporate media—especially Rupert Murdoch’s outlets—these groups are seeking to divert in xenophobic directions the mounting social discontent and political disaffection generated by four decades of deepening attacks on the jobs, working conditions, living standards and basic services of working people by all the parties of the political establishment.

There is no doubt about the reactionary character of the outfits involved in the “Reclaim Australia” protests. Behind the demagogic elevation of issues designed to generate tensions and splits in the working class—such as demands for bans on burkas, mosques and halal food certification—is an array of “White Australia” nationalist and fascistic groups. Among those waving Australian flags were thugs sporting swastika tattoos.

The organisations taking part in last Sunday’s rallies included the neo-Nazi Australian Defence League (ADL), which has been involved in violence against Muslims, especially women, and the Rise Up Australia

Party, a pro-Christian jingoist formation, whose leader Danny Nalliah was the “keynote speaker” at the Melbourne gathering. Addressing several hundred people in Brisbane was Pauline Hanson, a rabid anti-immigrant and anti-welfare politician whose “One Nation” party garnered a million votes in Queensland on the back of the widespread hostility toward both Labor and the Coalition during the late 1990s.

The “Reclaim Australia” events are being deliberately promoted by sections of the mainstream media as a means of channelling political unrest in divisive, nationalist directions amid a rapidly worsening economic situation facing Australian capitalism and an intensifying crisis of the parliamentary system.

Murdoch’s *Herald Sun* tabloid in Melbourne is now featuring reports that the “Reclaim Australia” leaders are vowing to stage “bigger rallies” across the country after last Sunday’s clashes with “No to racism” demonstrators. The newspaper quoted rally organiser Shermion Burgess, an ADL figure who calls himself “the Great Aussie Patriot,” declaring: “The next ones are going to be much, much bigger, seeing a lot more people now know that Reclaim Australia is here.”

This is under conditions where the same media proprietors, and other business leaders, are ramping up their pressure on the federal and state governments to find ways to impose drastic cuts to wage levels and social spending because of collapsing export prices for iron ore, coal and gas, the unravelling of the two-decade mining boom and the ongoing destruction of thousands of manufacturing jobs via global corporate restructuring.

However, the organisers of last Sunday’s “No Room for Racism” counter-rallies, led by the pseudo-left organisations Socialist Party and Socialist Alliance, are

attempting to divert the working class discontent back into the parliamentary framework and behind the very forces primarily responsible for enforcing the social crisis created by big business—the Labor Party, its Greens allies and the trade unions.

Not a word was said at Sunday’s counter-demonstrations about the role of Labor and the unions. Not only have they long implemented the free-market restructuring that has devastated working class conditions. They have encouraged the vilification of Muslims and refugees through their support for the bogus US-led “war on terror” and draconian measures to block asylum seekers trying to flee war, impoverishment and oppression by boat. At the same time, the unions have increasingly agitated against “foreign workers” being employed in Australia, blaming them for the jobs crisis.

Just in the past two weeks, the retail industry trade union struck a deal with employers to slash the wage penalty rates on which many workers depend for financial survival. At the same time during the New South Wales state election, the Labor Party and the unions tried to whip up chauvinistic anti-Asian opposition to the possible sale of the state electricity grid to a Chinese-government owned company.

Such are the forces to which the pseudo-left groups seek to tie the working class. They insist that Labor, or the Greens who back Labor governments, represent a “lesser evil” compared to the Coalition, and claim that the unions are genuine workers’ organisations. They vehemently oppose any struggle for the independent political mobilisation of the working class against this apparatus. That is why the featured speakers at the counter-rallies included people billed as union representatives.

Alongside them on the platforms were representatives of Islamic groups, churches and government-supported organisations promoting a “multicultural” Australia. This is another form of nationalism and identity politics that also serves to divide the global working class according to nation-state borders and ethnic backgrounds. It both defines working people in terms of their national origins, rather than their common class interests, and promotes the myth of a harmonious and tolerant “national unity” within Australia under the capitalist profit system. This covers over the essential class divide in society—that between the working class

and the super-rich corporate and financial elite.

The emergence onto the streets of Australia of neo-Nazi elements is a warning to working people of the violent and communalist forces to which the ruling class will turn increasingly as the economic crisis escalates. But it is also a warning of the price being paid for the continued suppression and diversion of the struggles and resistance of the working class by the Labor and union machine, and its pseudo-left accomplices.

The only way to defend social and democratic rights and defeat the threat of fascism is through the unification and mobilisation of the working class, independently of the Labor-union apparatus and all big business parties, to fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies.



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