

Australia: New laws force an end to Sydney tent city protest

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17 August 2017

About 60 homeless people involved in a long-running tent city protest in central Sydney's Martin Place were forced to leave the area last Friday morning, two days after the Liberal-National state government in New South Wales (NSW) imposed repressive new laws giving police explicit powers to arrest and fine the homeless.

The protest, which began last December, sought to pressure the state government and the Sydney city council to boost crisis accommodation for the increasing numbers of homeless in the city. Known as the 24/7 Street Kitchen and Safe Space, the protest encampment was located outside the Reserve Bank of Australia and close to the state parliament.

The state government responded with draconian legislation—the Sydney Public Reserves (Public Safety) Act—which it pushed through the parliament in just 24 hours last week, rejecting minor amendments from Labor and the Greens.

This measure will not just force the homeless out of Sydney's central business district and city tourist locations but punish and potentially jail them. Its provisions extend far beyond the homeless, to cover any protest or other activity in a public reserve.

Not only can people be evicted, their tents and other possessions can be seized. They can be fined up to \$5,500 for failing to comply, obstructing police or committing any other offence prescribed by regulations under the Act.

The legislation hands sweeping powers to a police officer to give a direction to anyone, or any group of people, if the officer believes that the people's presence "interferes with the reasonable enjoyment of the rights" of any "section of the public" in a public reserve. It applies to Martin Place, or any other Sydney public reserve proclaimed by the state government.

Such directions can include an order to leave the reserve and not return for a specified period, but there is no limit on the type of direction that the police can issue. The only exemptions are for "authorised public assemblies" or gatherings related to an "industrial dispute."

This is the third anti-protest legislation imposed by the

NSW state government during the past 18 months. Last year, extraordinary laws were introduced that can be used to shut down political protests and punish dissent. Two other Australian states also brought forward laws that criminalise protests or any other activities that are alleged to disrupt business operations.

The latest legislation was preceded by a hysterical campaign involving the state government and the media.

On August 4, NSW Family and Community Services Minister Pru Goward declared: "I don't care what it takes, we will move these people on." NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller added: "They will be gone at some stage... but this won't be the last time we will have a problem with the mixed homeless group with a taste for protest activity."

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore, a so-called independent backed by the Labor Party and the Greens, had said she would oppose government attempts to expel the protesters and claimed to have organised a deal for the homeless. Moore's promise was empty posturing—the "deal" did not involve any accommodation—and the state government pushed through its legislation.

Sydney City Council had previously intervened to dismantle tents and remove the belongings of homeless people camping or staying overnight in Martin Place, Wentworth Park and other inner-city areas.

In June 2016, council workers and police evicted homeless people who had been camping for six months outside the former Westpac building in Martin Place. The homeless were presented with a letter signed by director of city operations, David Riordan, deeming the camp a "public nuisance."

The assault on Sydney's homeless occurred during "National Homeless Week." The annual publicity event generally involves corporate executives and celebrities spending a night sleeping rough, which does nothing to stem the rising numbers of homeless and acute housing affordability crisis.

Across Australia, homeless shelters and crisis accommodation centres are at capacity and turning people

away. Homelessness Australia chairwoman Jenny Smith said: “We have 280,000 [homeless people] who have been seen by our services last year, which is an increase by 43,000 on the previous year.”

Sydney, where property prices and rents have soared, particularly over the past six years, is ranked the least affordable city for housing and accommodation in Australia and one of the most unaffordable cities in the world.

Homelessness Australia in 2013, estimated that NSW had over 29,000 homeless people, the highest of any Australian state or territory. According to the latest official City of Sydney street count, in February there were 433 homeless people and 489 people in crisis or temporary accommodation centres in central Sydney alone. This was a 28 percent increase since 2011.

While criminalising homelessness, the NSW government, like its Liberal-National and Labor counterparts around Australia, is continuing to systematically run down and sell off public housing. Inner-city public housing estates, particularly those with harbour views or at other prime locations, are providing windfall profits for state governments.

A short distance from Martin Place, the government is forcing public housing tenants out of the Sirius apartment block and selling the building. Scores of affordable rental homes and apartments are also being privatised at nearby Millers Point.

There are 60,000 people on the waiting list for public housing in NSW and almost 200,000 nationally. Only a handful of these people will ever secure the accommodation they seek. At the same time, financial speculation in Australia’s housing property bubble has produced hundreds of thousands of unoccupied homes and apartments across the country.

Organisers of the Martin Place tent city claimed the protest would “shine a light” on homelessness and pressure the state government to increase the number of crisis accommodation places. Confronted with the new laws, protest leaders directed the participants to pull down their tents and vacate Martin Place. According to protest organisers, at least 20 percent of those from the tent city are still “sleeping rough” in other inner-city streets.

WSWS reporters spoke with tent residents and volunteers last Friday before the protest was shut down. They explained that any accommodation offered by charities was only short-term—usually no more than a couple of nights in a hotel.

Nigel lived in the Martin Place tent city for about six months. He previously worked in advertising but went through a divorce in Hong Kong, resulting in his deportation to Australia. He had to leave his 10-year-old son in Hong Kong. A downward spiral of depression and isolation began

when he returned to Australia.

“Living here has taken me out of isolation, made me interact with people and given me confidence. Lanz [Priestly, the protest organiser] has got me working in the kitchen and around the community generally...When we have to move we’ve got to stick together. We have to keep this community together and move together somewhere else.”

Stu, originally from Auckland in New Zealand, joined the Martin Place protest when it began last December.

“I’m here because I want to show people in Sydney how bad the homeless situation is and to be in solidarity with other homeless people. I came to Australia in 1979 and worked as a French polisher and in other jobs. I set up a small business in Canberra importing fireworks but the government changed the law and my business collapsed.

“There were court cases and appeals. All the money I had went on that and my life went downhill. I was jailed for 15 months for driving without a licence. I couldn’t get any work and I’ve now got heart problems and I’m on a disability.

“I’ve been homeless now for seven years. I’ve been helped by various charities but it’s only temporary. They can’t seem to be able to do much for us. The tents and sleeping bags we have here have been donated but apart from that the people here don’t have anything. It’s homeless week and there’s all this publicity. We have CEOs doing sleep outs every year but this doesn’t change anything.

“I don’t agree with the state government or Sydney council. They talk on the media about how they’re concerned about homelessness, but what do they do? Politicians are only interested in looking after the rich. They can push us out of Martin Place or pass laws banning what we’re doing but this isn’t going to help us find accommodation and we’ll just have to go somewhere else. They want to cover up the problem.”



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