

Australia: Widespread opposition to violent arrest of elderly Sydney protester

Our reporters
16 January 2019

Last Friday, three New South Wales (NSW) police officers violently arrested Danny Lim, a well-known “sandwich board” protester, in Sydney’s affluent inner-city casino and entertainment precinct of Barangaroo.

The unprovoked attack has caused widespread anger. It was filmed by bystanders and has been viewed over a million times on Facebook.

The video showed the police officers aggressively confronting Lim, ripping the sign from his hands and arresting him. The diminutive Lim was visibly distressed and was shouting for help.

One witness, Christina Halm, wrote on Facebook: “I saw police officers use a completely unnecessary and unacceptable amount of force to arrest Danny for wearing a humorous sign. There was a crowd of at least 30 who had stopped in their tracks once we realised what was happening, clearly all shocked, gasping and crying at what we were seeing.”

Another passerby, Niki Anstiss, commented: “This is disgusting. I saw three police officers brutally rip his sign from his back and arrest him while he was screaming for them to not take his sign. He did nothing wrong.”

Lim later posted pictures to social media showing severe bruising on his arms as a result of the arrest.

The pretext for the police attack was that the sign Lim was holding read: “SMILE CVN’T! WHY CVN’T?” Lim has been charged with “offensive behaviour,” on the grounds that the last term on the sign is similar to a well-known swear word.

Lim has carried out one-man protests with signs condemning politicians, calling for peace and commenting on topical developments, for the past decade.

He was previously arrested in 2015, for a sign denouncing then Liberal-National Prime Minister Tony

Abbott as “a liar, heartless and cruel,” and opposing his government’s cuts to education. The sign had used a similar term to the one on his placard last Friday. A conviction recorded against Lim was subsequently overturned in 2017, with a district court judge finding that the sign was unlikely to cause offence.

As a number of comments on the video of Lim’s recent arrest have noted, it took place in the context of a dramatic build-up of police powers.

Under the bogus pretext of the “war on terror” and ensuring “public order,” successive Labor and Liberal-National governments at the state and federal level have expanded police powers, including to hold people without charge, conduct raids and disperse demonstrations.

A series of new laws and regulations have been introduced in New South Wales, curtailing the right to protest. In June, the state Liberal-National government’s Crown Lands Management Regulation came into effect, with sweeping provisions for police and other officials to “direct a person” to stop “taking part in any gathering, meeting or assembly.”

In 2017, the government passed legislation enabling police to issue a move-on directive to any individual or group in a public area who they deem “interferes with the reasonable enjoyment of the rights” of any “section of the public.” These followed laws introduced the previous year, effectively allowing police to shut down any protest or public gathering.

Similar measures have been introduced by state Labor governments across the country. In Victoria, the Labor government of Daniel Andrews is expanding the police force by 20 percent, hiring an additional 3,100 officers over four years. It has also boosted their powers, including to collect DNA samples from alleged suspects without a warrant.

The buildup of state forces is part of the preparations by the ruling elite to suppress emerging struggles by the working class and young people against war, escalating militarism, inequality and the austerity agenda supported by the entire political establishment.

In one indication of growing opposition around 30,000 people responded to a Facebook event supporting Lim.

Around 200 attended a rally outside the central Sydney police station on Sunday. Lim told the media after the event that he had told the police the sign had previously been deemed to be lawful. He said he had appealed for medical attention and explained that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

He said his appeals to the police officers had been ignored, and added: "At the end you know why they wouldn't listen? I'm an easy target. I'm small but I have the heart to do it. Everyone must have a heart. Don't be afraid." Lim has threatened to take legal action against the police.

The WSWS spoke to a number of participants at the rally.

James, a 24-year-old mechanic, said: "I always see Danny around Sydney. He's always just trying to make people happy. This is about having the right to display a poster about what you want, where you want."

Hayden, a young student, commented: "I've come here to support the protest because there needs to be a strong change in the way Australia is run. The people at the top have too much power to the point where they control everything. It's not fair. It's not being distributed equally.

"It's becoming a problem of the wealthy and the elite versus the citizens, and it's getting to the point of police brutality. We're probably not going to get an apology to a 74-year-old man who did nothing wrong. We're probably going to have to have another protest just to get that."

Hayden added: "I come from a mining town in Western Australia and police brutality can be quite bad, especially directed against Aboriginal communities. But this is also happening worldwide."

Min, a TAFE student, said: "I completely stand with Danny. I think what happened to him was an absolute injustice and a disgusting abuse of police power. He wasn't doing anything wrong. Every time you see Danny, he's just happy and it's kind of nice to see that

in Sydney. You don't see many people promoting peace or happiness.

"The police put on a uniform and think they're untouchable and everybody else has to watch out for them. They make you feel afraid for your rights and if you don't know your rights, you can be called out when you're stopped by them. I feel that they're more of a gang than that they're here to protect you.

"There's a political side to it. Because it's been happening for so long, it becomes normalised. They're really protecting themselves, politicians and the rich. They don't care about poor people or people with disabilities or gay people."

Claire stated that "the laws are going back to being draconian and heavy handed. A lot of people are standing against that and the more that people stand up for what's right, the more the law will try to come and crush that. Follow the money.

"I've been protesting for 30 years and can tell you that 20 years ago things were discussed a lot more broadly and we were able to say what we thought in a much broader sense, without fearing being in trouble from the law. It's up to the people. We've just got to rise up."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact