

Australian governments trial police-state measures against climate protesters

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Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, and police authorities across the country have responded to Extinction Rebellion (XR) climate demonstrations over the past week with vicious denunciations and police-state measures.

Thousands of people have taken part in various protest actions in the major cities. In some cases, they have blocked traffic and carried out other stunts, as they have condemned the refusal of successive governments to take any action to mitigate or resolve climate change.

The protests, which are part of an internationally coordinated action, follow mass climate strikes involving hundreds of thousands of Australian workers, students and young people last month.

Despite the relatively small size of the XR protests, and the minimal disruptions that resulted, senior government figures have branded them as a major threat to society.

Federal Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has, on separate occasions, called for protesters to be stripped of welfare payments, demanded that they be “named and shamed” and suggested that they be “sent a bill” for any public costs allegedly incurred by their actions, including to pay for the massive police presence at the rallies.

Underscoring the police-state character of the official response, there is no legal basis for most of the anti-democratic measures demanded by Dutton. This demonstrates that the government is using the protests to press ahead with a turn to authoritarianism, amid mounting social and political opposition.

It is also using inflammatory rhetoric as part of its attempt to whip up an extreme right-wing constituency, and to build support among climate change deniers. The logic of the official denunciations was spelt out by morning television host Kerri-Anne Kennerley. She

declared that demonstrators should be used as “speed humps,” suggesting that motorists run over them.

The police have carried out a concerted crackdown on the protesters. On October 7, the first of the seven-day demonstrations, 38 people were arrested in Sydney, along with 10 in Melbourne. A number of individuals have also been detained in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, and Hobart in Tasmania.

A number of those arrested in Sydney were elderly people who were grabbed by riot police while peacefully protesting on a city road. One of them, a 75-year-old, was forcefully dragged to his feet by police, using a wristlock. He was later taken to hospital complaining of pain in his wrists and arms. Others alleged that they had been injured. Young teenagers were also detained.

Most of those who were charged after arrest in Sydney faced only the minor offense of “disobeying police directions regarding a road closure.” Despite this, they were presented by police with extremely stringent bail conditions. Those who refused to sign on the spot were detained for over 30 hours, remaining in custody overnight.

The bail conditions banned the protesters from a 2.5 kilometre radius encompassing much of the Sydney central business district and forbade them from even communicating with other members of the XR movement. Civil liberties organisations noted that such measures had previously only been applied to members of outlaw motorcycle clubs and individuals charged with serious criminal offenses.

In the Sydney Downing Centre local court on Thursday, a judge threw out the bail conditions imposed on former Greens Senator Scott Ludlam. She noted that the minor offense with which he was charged “wouldn’t ordinarily attract bail conditions.”

Ludlam and another protester have also launched a legal challenge against fines that were imposed upon them. Their alleged “offense” was blocking a road in the city that was not even open to traffic at the time.

Greg James, the barrister who represented Ludlam and other protesters, stated outside court on Thursday that there would likely be further legal challenges. He said that the questions raised, included whether the heavy-handed conduct of police and the punitive bail conditions “unreasonably restrict the implied constitutional right of political communication. Plainly, these protests were designed to communicate on political matters.”

Significantly, it is the Queensland Labor government that has gone the furthest in seeking to exploit the XR protests to enshrine anti-democratic measures in legislation. Labor is trying to fast-track laws through parliament that would dramatically expand police search powers, and introduce punitive penalties for protesters.

The measures have been introduced on the basis of concocted lies. Speaking to parliament in August, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk claimed that protesters were using “sinister tactics,” including cylinders and drums containing glass fragments, “even butane gas containers, so that anyone trying to cut a protester free will be injured, or worse.” She provided no proof for these assertions. It later transpired that a photo, which supposedly backed up her claims, was taken at a completely unrelated event a year before.

The WSWS explained at the time: “Under Labor’s proposed laws, protesters caught using certain ‘devices’ would face up to two years in prison or a \$6,500 fine, and up to one year behind bars or a \$2,600 fine for merely possessing them. Police would have the power to search people they ‘reasonably suspected’ possessed such devices, in addition to the wide-ranging search powers they already have. Exactly what ‘devices’ would be outlawed has not been announced, giving rise to fears they could include ordinary household items.”

The *Guardian* reported last week that the measures have provoked disquiet even within some Queensland Labor branches. Members of the party, it stated, were comparing the new measures to notorious anti-protest laws introduced by the right-wing government of Joh Bjelke-Petersen in the 1970s. The concerns are

motivated by fears that Labor’s role in spearheading repressive legislation will further discredit it, amid a historic collapse of the party’s support.

The XR protests express frustration, especially among young people, that previous political actions, including huge climate strikes, have done nothing to alter government policy. XR’s various stunts and militant tactics, however, do nothing to resolve the issues of political perspective that must be tackled in the fight against environmental degradation. In the final analysis, XR’s “radical” actions are aimed at pressuring the very political establishment responsible for the climate crisis.

In reality, climate change is a product of the subordination of every aspect of social life to the capitalist market. Its effects can only be reversed through the complete reorganisation of social and economic life on a world scale, to meet social need, not private profit. This requires an international socialist movement of the working class.

Notwithstanding the political weaknesses of the recent demonstrations, the attacks against them must be unequivocally opposed. They are aimed at establishing a precedent for the criminalisation of protests and political organisations, and the victimisation of anyone who engages in political activities that challenge the powers that be. The fundamental target, amid a resurgence of the class struggle internationally and a deepening social and political crisis in Australia, is the working class.



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