

Australian state Labor government spearheads anti-protest laws

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Despite protests and the exposure of its lies about “dangerous” demonstrations, Queensland’s state Labor government rushed new anti-protest laws through parliament last week. Demonstrators using proscribed “devices” can be jailed for up to two years and police have expanded powers to conduct personal and vehicle searches without judicial warrants.

By accelerating the legislation, the Labor Party has taken the lead in a wider drive by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments across the country to outlaw many forms of political protest amid growing discontent in Australia and worldwide, particularly over worsening social inequality and ecological dangers.

Backed by the Liberal National Party (LNP) opposition, the state parliament passed the Summary Offences and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 last Thursday. Just two days earlier, more than 200 people rallied outside the Queensland parliament to denounce the legislation. The demonstrators included environmental activists, civil liberties representatives and construction workers.

A token parliamentary committee inquiry into the bill also had received more than 200 submissions, most voicing opposition to the attack on the democratic right to protest and the underlying right to political free speech.

The bill will see demonstrators jailed for allegedly trying to use “lock-on” devices to prevent police from dragging them away from protests. It also gives the police powers of search and seizure if they “reasonably suspect” that a person has “something that may be a dangerous attachment device” that could be used “to disrupt a relevant lawful activity.”

Introducing the bill in parliament, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk repeated the false claims that she and her ministers had made throughout the media for weeks to

justify the measures. She insisted that the bill did not infringe on the right to protest but only targeted the use of “dangerous attachment devices” that “are reinforced with metal, wire or glass—fragments that can become projectiles—they can injure police, emergency services workers or members of our community.”

Palaszczuk and other Labor leaders had accused Extinction Rebellion and other environmental demonstrators of using deadly booby traps designed to maim or kill police and emergency services personnel. But they produced no evidence to substantiate their allegations, which protest groups strongly denied.

This exposure of the government’s lies did not halt the Labor Party’s determination to be in the forefront of imposing a wave of anti-protest laws. Last month, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s federal Coalition government, backed by Labor, pushed through parliament a bill that could see people jailed for up to five years for using social media, emails or phone calls to promote, or even advertise, protests against agribusinesses. Morrison’s government is also working with state governments to impose harsher jail terms on demonstrators, adding to expanded anti-protest laws imposed over the past three years.

In Queensland, protesters obstructing traffic or resisting arrest already faced court-imposed fines up to \$61,000. The Labor government has also introduced a bill setting penalties of up to one year in jail for people found guilty of trespassing on agricultural premises to protest against animal cruelty. In April, Palaszczuk’s government authorised police and biosecurity officers to issue on-the-spot fines of \$652 to such demonstrators, on top of existing trespass penalties.

During last Thursday’s parliamentary session, Agriculture Minister Mark Furner boasted of Labor’s record. “Earlier this year, in my portfolio, we as a

government amended the regulations under the Biosecurity Act to allow Queensland Police Service and biosecurity officers to immediately fine people who put on-farm biosecurity at risk. We acted, and acted quickly, and broadly industry was supportive of the quick response.”

Furner’s remarks underscore Labor’s anxiety to satisfy the demands of agribusiness and other sections of big business for the suppression of any political dissent that threatens corporate profits.

Clearly, the targets of these measures go beyond the recent Extinction Rebellion protests, which temporarily blocked traffic in the Queensland capital of Brisbane, as they did in other cities around the world. During last Thursday’s short parliamentary debate, references were made to the mass protests sweeping the globe against social inequality and attacks on working class conditions.

Education Minister Grace Grace admitted that the importance of protests had been “brought to the forefront of people’s mind” by “many around the world at the moment.” She said people “may or may not agree with the protests that are happening in Hong Kong, London, Santiago and Paris over various domestic and international issues.”

In their speeches, Labor ministers hypocritically professed to defend the right to protest, provided it was “lawful.” So did the leaders of the LNP, who supported the legislation, even as they criticised the government for not going further to outlaw “unlawful assembly” and set mandatory jail terms for people arrested more than once during protests.

The Queensland legislation has provoked outrage, including among those who still had illusions that Labor was a “lesser evil.” Palaszczyk insisted that her government was not reprising the notorious blanket anti-demonstration laws of the Bjelke-Petersen National Party state government of the 1980s. She even bragged of having joined the widespread protests against those laws.

Palaszczyk’s comments only point to the fact that Labor’s anti-democratic trajectory is part of a global shift. Governments around the world are increasingly turning to repressive and authoritarian methods of rule in the face of the resurgence of mass protests, from France to Puerto Rico, Haiti, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador, Indonesia and Hong Kong.

Labor’s Summary Offences and Other Legislation Amendment Bill contains measures that can be used well beyond environmental or animal cruelty protests. The “dangerous devices” banned include “sleeping dragons”—concrete-filled pipes that lock protesters’ arms together—and “dragon’s dens”—steel drums filled with concrete. These devices make it difficult for police to remove protesters. Also specifically outlawed are “monopoles” and “tripods,” used to delay coal trains.

However, the provisions are vague enough to cover any equipment that “reasonably appears” to be designed to prevent a demonstrator from being removed and arrested. Likewise, the “relevant lawful activity” that must not be disrupted is defined in sweeping terms. This includes “transport infrastructure,” “entering or leaving a place of business” and “the ordinary operation of plant or equipment.”

In other words, these laws criminalise protests that allegedly disrupt business operations. They can be used more broadly to suppress opposition, including industrial action by workers, to the deepening assault by governments and the corporate elite on jobs, living standards and social conditions.

The laws attack fundamental democratic rights, including free speech, free movement and freedom to associate. They have nothing to do with protecting the public from “unsafe” protests. Rather they are intended to intimidate and quash the growing anger produced by the deteriorating social and environmental conditions.



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