

Bipartisan drive to outlaw protest in Australia

Mike Head
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Australian Labor Party leaders immediately backed Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week when he denounced political protests and boycotts and vowed that his government would draft new laws to ban them.

Morrison, who heads the Liberal-National Coalition, adopted the fascistic language of US President Donald Trump, accusing environmental demonstrators of “economic sabotage” and “indulgent and selfish practices” to “disrupt people’s lives and disrespect your fellow Australians.”

While cynically claiming to uphold the right to protest, Morrison said it was “not an unlimited licence.” Essentially, he declared that any activities, including street demonstrations and calls for business boycotts that threatened profits, would not be tolerated.

Morrison’s offensive against the basic democratic right of protest and free speech came in a radio talkback interview and a speech to a mining industry gathering last Friday. Without providing any specifics, he said his government would “identify mechanisms” to “successfully outlaw” conduct that potentially damaged any businesses.

Turning reality on its head, the prime minister charged protesters, not the corporate elite, with seeking to impose their views on society. He claimed that “progressivism”—which he labelled a “newspeak type term,” invoking George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*—intended to “deny the liberties of Australians.”

Branding environmental demonstrators as “anarchist groups,” Morrison told radio station 3AW that their protests were “getting well beyond the pale.” It was “not OK” for them “to be able to disrupt people’s jobs and their livelihoods and to harass in the way that we’ve seen down in Melbourne.”

This was another perversion of the truth. Last week, police mobilised in Melbourne by the Victorian state Labor government violently attacked several hundred climate change protesters who sought to oppose a

global mining conference at the city’s convention centre. Many people were arrested and dragged off, and at least one woman was hospitalised after police horse charges.

Last Friday night, Morrison gave a pledge to a mining executives’ function in Queensland. “Let me assure you this is not something my government intends to allow to go unchecked,” he said. Branding consumer boycott campaigns against big banks, mining and other corporations as an “insidious threat” to the Australian economy, he stated: “There is no place for economic sabotage dressed up as activism.”

Seeking to agitate a right-wing base, the prime minister painted a picture of society under threat from people concerned about the devastating impact of climate change. “A new breed of radical activism is the on the march,” he claimed. “Apocalyptic in tone. Brooks no compromise. All or nothing. Alternative views—not permitted.”

Likewise, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton threatened new measures to punish climate protesters, whom he said were “completely against our way of life” and “don’t even believe in democracy.” Dutton, who is in charge of the federal police, intelligence agencies and Border Force, suggested demonstrators should be forced to pay for police deployments used to counter their protests. “The disharmony that they seek to sow within our society is unacceptable,” Dutton said.

Labor Party leaders were quick to join in. Deputy leader Richard Marles said protesters had been “absolutely indulgent” at “the expense of Australians” and the parliamentary opposition would consider any legislation the Morrison government brought forward. At the same time, Marles urged the government to enforce the anti-protest laws already in place.

These laws include a bill that the government pushed through parliament in September, backed by Labor, 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.

Victorian state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews also condemned the Melbourne protesters for their “appalling behaviour.” Like Morrison, he claimed to support the right to “peacefully protest,” but there was “a big difference between peaceful protest and what we saw.” Andrews and his ministers enthusiastically endorsed last week’s violence by their government’s police force. Later, evidence emerged that at least two of the police officers involved in the brutality displayed symbols associated with far-right and neo-fascist organisations.

In fact, the Labor Party has taken the lead in a wider drive by Labor and Coalition governments across the country to outlaw many forms of political protest. This is taking place amid growing discontent in Australia and worldwide, particularly over worsening social inequality, deteriorating living conditions and ecological dangers.

Queensland’s state Labor government rushed new anti-protest laws through parliament last month. 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.

Morrison’s Coalition government is also working with state Labor and Coalition governments alike to impose harsher jail terms on demonstrators, adding to barrages of expanded anti-protest laws imposed over the past three years.

Exactly what further laws Morrison has in mind is not yet certain, but they will constitute a further sweeping attack on the fundamental democratic rights of the working class.

So-called “secondary boycotts” and other solidarity industrial action by workers against companies are already outlawed under draconian industrial relations laws imposed during the 1970s. This legislation and other anti-strike measures were entrenched by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, with the help of the trade unions, in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the Competition and Consumer Act currently still permits boycotts (but not industrial action) for the “dominant purpose” of environmental protection or consumer protection.

The targets of this authoritarian drive are not only the

most recent climate change protests but the broader growing opposition to big business. This has been reflected in the huge demonstrations led by school students across Australia and around the world during September, and the mass protests erupting, from Chile to Iraq, against social inequality and attacks on working class conditions.

What is alarming the ruling class and its political servants, Labor and Coalition like, is the deepening anti-capitalist sentiment among young people and throughout the working class, which finds no voice within the political establishment.

The anti-protest laws have nothing to do with protecting the public from “unsafe” protests. Rather, they attack the most basic democratic rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom to organise.



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