

Australian police use COVID-19 emergency powers to ban refugee detention protest

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Utilising emergency powers invoked by the state Labor government in Victoria, ostensibly to curb the spread of COVID-19, police in Melbourne shut down a political demonstration last week, arresting one protester and fining 26 others.

The April 10 protest was held in opposition to the continued inhuman imprisonment of refugees by the federal Liberal-National government, which is putting the detainees at extreme risk of contracting the coronavirus.

The police action, which state Premier Daniel Andrews' Labor government must have authorised, constitutes a direct attack on the right to protest and other fundamental democratic rights, including free speech. It indicates that governments are exploiting the coronavirus crisis to establish police-state precedents for wider use.

The protest was organised in front of the Mantra Hotel in the northern Melbourne suburb of Preston, which the federal government is using as a makeshift prison to house about 60 asylum seekers evacuated from "offshore" detention centres for medical treatment.

Sleeping up to three men to a room, the detainees are unable to practice any form of safe social distancing. Security guards, hired from the multinational company Serco, regularly come in and out of the hotel. The refugees are at a high risk of potentially fatal infection due to pre-existing medical conditions.

In order to abide by the state government's social distancing laws, the protesters organised a car motorcade around the building, holding signs to the windows of their cars. Despite there being no threat to public health, the police issued 26 fines of \$1,652 to each protester.

The organiser of the protest was earlier arrested at his

house and charged with inciting the others to join the demonstration. He was taken to the Preston police station where he spent nine hours in custody while police obtained a warrant to seize his phone and home computers. He faces court in August.

The men imprisoned in the hotel also joined the protest, holding makeshift signs saying they had no social distancing protections. Some said they had been imprisoned for seven years and asked: "Where's the humanity?"

A police spokesperson told the media: "While Victoria Police respects the public's right to protest, these are extraordinary times and the health and safety of every Victorian needs to be our number one priority at this time."

In reality, the police banned the protest despite the organisers informing them in advance of the measures they would take to avoid any danger to health or any infringement of the social distancing rules.

All the federal, state and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have adopted far-reaching state powers to enforce COVID-19 lockdown measures imposed by a bipartisan "national cabinet."

While such measures have become necessary because of the global pandemic, the Melbourne ban is a warning. These powers are being utilised already to silence discontent and will be used more broadly against the working class as the government gears up to force people back to work, regardless of unsafe conditions.

The crackdown came amid protests by detainees in Sydney and Brisbane and an upsurge of opposition to their continued detention by the federal government during the pandemic.

After a guard was confirmed to have contracted the coronavirus at the Kangaroo Point Hotel, a cramped

and dirty makeshift prison in Brisbane, a petition was created to demand the shutdown of the facilities and release all the prisoners. Having reached its initial goal of 25,000, it now has more than 41,000 signatures.

Nearly 1,200 doctors and other health professionals also signed an open letter calling for all asylum seekers to be released into the community during the pandemic. The letter said the hotels being used as detention sites “constitute a very high-risk environment for detainees’ mental and physical health.”

At the hotel in Brisbane, refugees are conducting an ongoing protest, which has lasted for a fortnight, holding signs desperately asking for release.

In Sydney, detainees at the Villawood detention centre have climbed on the roof holding signs asking to be freed. A group of 35 men imprisoned have been on a five-day hunger strike as part of the protest.

Ghader Mohammed, an Iranian man who has been imprisoned for seven years, told the media it was impossible to maintain the 1.5-metre social distancing. “The situation here is absolute chaos,” he said.

After the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) imposed further restrictions on the detainees, forbidding families to visit the centres. While the AFP justified this as a precautionary measure against the virus, Mohammad revealed that the staff are entering and leaving the centre without gloves or masks, placing everyone at risk.

Mohammad told the media of the cramped conditions at the prison, with up to six people housed in one room. “If you’re talking about gatherings, which are [restricted] at no more than two people, we are here more than 35 people in one place and we are nearly hugging each other,” he said.

This criminal treatment of refugees is part of Australia’s bipartisan “border protection” regime, which detains all refugees who try to flee to Australia by boat and bans them from ever settling in the country.

Similar outrages are occurring globally. In Europe, where the virus is continuing to spread rapidly with nearly 80,000 deaths across the continent, the facilities where refugees are imprisoned in Greece are turning into death camps. Some 42,000 refugees are packed in crammed living quarters, which lack even soap and running water.

In the United States, 55,000 immigrants are trapped in crowded prisons, which are rapidly becoming

epicentres for the spread of the disease. More and more people are testing positive for COVID-19 in the facilities. Detainees are staging hunger strikes in protest, demanding their immediate release.

On February 28, the WSWs published a statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International, entitled “For a globally coordinated emergency response to the coronavirus pandemic!” It insisted: “Urgent attention must be directed to the millions of people who are being housed in immigrant and refugee camps set up by the major capitalist powers in Europe and the United States. These camps will be major danger areas for the spread of the virus. All those currently in such camps must be given secure housing and access to health care.”



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