

Thousands rally in Perth, Australia against police violence

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More than 2,000 people took to the streets of Perth yesterday to express solidarity with the mass US demonstrations triggered by the brutal police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The rally was the first in a series of events across the country that are also being called in opposition to state killings in Australia, with a particular focus on Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Some demonstrators in Perth stated they had been spurred to take action by Prime Minister Scott Morrison's assertion that the US protests, which have expanded into over 70 cities, had little relevance to conditions in Australia.

Speaking on national radio yesterday morning, Morrison declared: "As upsetting and terrible that the murder that took place was, and it is shocking, that also just made me cringe, I just think to myself how wonderful a country is Australia."

Asked about protests in Australian cities, most of which are taking place this weekend, Morrison stated: "There's no need to import things happening in other countries here to Australia. Australia is not the United States."

Other ministers in the government, which has close ties to the US administration of President Donald Trump, have declined to comment when asked about the brutal police crackdown on the American demonstrations. The Labor Party opposition is also saying virtually nothing about the biggest news story in the world.

This is not only the result of the unconditional support of the major parties for the US-Australia alliance, and for all of Washington's predatory wars and military preparations, including those directed against China in the Asia-Pacific region. It is also bound up with fears over the fragility of the social and political situation within Australia, amid mass unemployment resulting from the crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, and widespread discontent.

The reaction expresses nervousness within the political establishment that the powerful social struggle in the US is resonating among Australian workers and youth. They know that the underlying causes of the upheavals in the US, including mounting anger over unprecedented social inequality, the continuous build-up of police powers and the

dominance over society of a tiny corporate and financial elite are as present in Australia as elsewhere.

The event in Perth was among the largest held in the city over recent years, despite being called at short notice on a weeknight. The potential for the emerging movement to grow rapidly has also been revealed by the reaction on social media. On Facebook, almost 8,000 people have indicated that they will be attending the Melbourne rally this Saturday, while 11,000 more have expressed interest. Thousands are supporting demonstrations in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide.

Protesters in Perth marched through the city's central business district in the early evening. They chanted slogans including "I can't breathe" in reference to Floyd's last words as a police officer suffocated him by pressing his knee to the prone man's neck.

Demonstrators carried homemade placards, with statements including: "Respect existence or expect resistance," "Dismantle power structures of oppression" and "The government does not care! We the people must help each other!"

Many directly challenged the official claims that Australia is exempt from the rising tide of police violence and oppression internationally, with one sign declaring: "Australia is not innocent" and another "400+ dead in custody. Justice?"

The latter was a reference to the 432 Aboriginal people who have died in custody since the 1987-1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which served as an official white-wash.

There are clear parallels between a number of the killings and the brutal murder of Floyd.

The family of David Dungay, a 26-year-old Aboriginal man who died in Sydney's Long Bay jail in 2015, have noted that both men said the same last words as they were being attacked by police: "I can't breathe."

Dungay, who suffered from diabetes and schizophrenia, was set upon in his cell by five officers, because he was eating a packet of biscuits. They brutally restrained him and

smothered his face in a pillow, while a nurse administered sedatives. Dungay complained that he could not breathe 12 times. No one has been held to account for his death.

Dungay's nephew Paul Francis-Silva told the media this week that he "couldn't really watch the video [of Floyd's death] all the way through—they both died in a similar way." Addressing the US protesters, he stated: "My thoughts really go out to the family and everyone on the streets in the USA. My solidarity is with them because I do know the pain they are feeling."

Other recent heinous crimes include the fatal police shooting of 19-year-old Aboriginal man Kumanjayi Walker at his family's house in the Northern Territory town of Yuendumu last November, and the September killing of 29-year-old Joyce Clarke outside her Western Australian home. Neither were posing a threat to the police when they were killed.

Only yesterday, a police officer attacked a 16-year-old Aboriginal boy in inner-city Sydney, violently throwing him to the ground. The boy and his friends were reportedly being questioned merely because they were spending time with each other in public, a common occurrence for Aboriginal youth.

The 16-year-old, who had committed no crime, was taken to hospital with a bruised shoulder, chipped teeth and other injuries. Footage of the assault has been viewed by tens of thousands.

Organisers of the Australian protests have heavily promoted the US "Black Lives Matter" movement. It presents US police shootings as an exclusively racial issue. This serves to cover up the underlying class issues and promote the big business Democratic Party, which has itself overseen the militarisation of the police and bears direct responsibility for countless police killings.

Claims that police violence in Australia is solely the result of racism directed against Aboriginals is no less false. Australian police, who are also saturated with fascist sentiments as their US counterparts, are undoubtedly trained to brutalise Aboriginal people. But this is a function of their class role—to repress workers and young people, defend the capitalist state and guarantee the wealth and privileges of a corporate oligarchy.

Aboriginal workers are disproportionately affected because they are the most oppressed section of the working class, condemned by successive capitalist governments, Labor and Liberal alike, to live in poverty, without access to decent healthcare, housing and other social necessities. Their plight, however, is the most graphic expression of broader attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Young people of all backgrounds are routinely harassed

and targeted by the police in the working-class suburbs of the major cities. The common denominator of virtually all victims of police violence, moreover, is that they are poor or mentally-ill.

A 2013 Australian Institute of Criminology study found that police fatally shot 105 people between 1989 and 2011. At least 42 percent of the victims suffered a mental illness. The most common issue was schizophrenia, accounting for 59 percent.

Recent tragic examples include:

- The 2015 fatal shooting of Courtney Topic, a 22-year-old in Western Sydney, with major mental issues. Police confronted her as she was walking down a street, dazed and carrying a knife. They shot her within 41 seconds, with witnesses stating that she did not pose any threat.

- The August 2017 killing of Ian Fackender, a schizophrenic man who was shot after police found him at home, lying in bed with a sword nearby.

- The fatal shooting of Todd McKenzie, a 40-year-old man diagnosed with schizophrenia, last August. He had been seen on his verandah holding a knife. He was shot dead by five officers who burst into his house.

As in the US, the fight against police violence requires a rejection of identity politics, which serve to divide the working class and cover-up the responsibility of the capitalist system. The pseudo-left and racial organisations promoting black nationalism speak for affluent layers of the upper middle-class. They habitually promote the Labor Party, which has played a central role in boosting police powers and numbers.

As the WSWS wrote on Saturday: "The eruption of mass demonstrations of workers and youth of all races triggered by the brutal murder of Floyd has given expression to a tremendous social solidarity, which belies the racial narrative. It is not a question of black against white, but the working class against the rich. This is a tremendous step forward."



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