

Australian PM calls for mass arrests at protests against police violence

Oscar Grenfell**12 June 2020**

Speaking on Melbourne radio yesterday morning, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for a major crackdown on protests against police violence over the weekend, including mass arrests and fines.

Morrison was asked by Neil Mitchell, a right-wing “shock-jock” on 3AW, whether all participants in future protests should be charged and detained by the police for breaching public health orders that prohibit mass gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic. “I really do think they should, because you can’t have a double standard here,” he replied.

The PM made clear that this was motivated by political hostility to the global demonstrations triggered by the US police murder of George Floyd. He declared that Australian rallies had been “hijacked by left-wing radicals,” who were using them to pursue “their own political agendas.”

Morrison’s statements echoed similar denunciations of US protests by President Donald Trump, who has railed against “left-wing extremists” and presented the mass movement as a conspiracy orchestrated by anti-fascist groupings. Trump’s fascistic rantings have served to legitimise a violent police rampage being overseen by his administration, and the unprecedented threat to deploy the military against the demonstrations, in a frontal assault on the US Constitution.

Morrison’s comments were particularly provocative. They were directed against the more than 100,000 workers and young people who took part in some of the largest Australian protests in recent years, last weekend.

The size of the turnout has exacerbated fears within ruling circles that opposition to police violence could become the focal point for a broader political movement, amid widespread hostility to the billions of dollars that have been provided to big business during the pandemic, the pittance given to those thrown out of work and growing social inequality.

State Labor and Liberal governments have also condemned the protests and sought to block or curtail them. The Western Australian (WA) Labor government has demanded that a rally this Saturday in Perth be indefinitely postponed. Over 8,000 people have indicated on social media that they will attend and the organisers have stated that they will defy the government threats.

Morrison’s calls for a crackdown, however, have provoked nervousness from state authorities. WA police commissioner Chris Dawson responded by saying that he could not “wrap a Superman cape over myself and say I’ll issue 10,000 infringements.” He warned that attempting to prevent the rally from taking place would result in “hundreds of people being arrested and grappling with police,” potentially inflaming the situation further.

The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government has nevertheless effectively banned two protests in Sydney. Police have declared that a rally this evening against police violence and indigenous deaths in custody is “unauthorised,” because organisers did not fulfil the anti-democratic requirement to provide them with seven days’ notice of the event.

Assistant NSW police commissioner Mick Willing told the media yesterday that the police would not hesitate to detain and “prosecute those who attend.” He menacingly stated that police had assigned “significant resources” to block the protest.

NSW police, acting under the direction of the state government, have also successfully applied for the Supreme Court to declare a Sydney rally in defence of refugees tomorrow as “unlawful.” The event has been called in opposition to the illegal incarceration of asylum-seekers in detention centres, and the effective imprisonment of those who have been transported from the Pacific to Australia on health grounds, in overcrowded hotels.

The organisers of that protest had submitted the required

paperwork, but the court still declared that they would be in violation of public health orders supposedly limiting public gatherings to ten people, if they proceeded. The ruling was made despite a similar Supreme Court decision blocking last Saturday's Sydney rally against police violence having been overturned at the last minute by an appeals court.

A clear precedent is being established for the suppression of oppositional political events and the indefinite suspension of basic democratic rights. The political character of this campaign was summed up by the fact that the NSW police unsuccessfully sought to ban the Sydney protest last weekend, not only on health grounds, but also because they claimed it threatened to "incite violence or other unlawfulness."

The claims by governments that their attacks on the protests are motivated by concern for health and safety are a transparent sham.

This afternoon, the national cabinet, composed of the federal government and state and territory leaders, is meeting to discuss lifting the few remaining lockdown measures introduced in response to the pandemic.

They are considering moving to "stage three" of a three-step plan to "reopen the economy." This would entail entire workforces being returned to their places of employment, and the reopening of venues that could trigger mass COVID-19 outbreaks such as nightclubs and food courts.

Already, the NSW government, despite its professed opposition to mass gatherings, has permitted RSL clubs to have 500 people on their premises at any one time. Corporate boxes at the state's Rugby League football grounds are to reopen, with up to 50 people in a room.

Students and teachers have been herded back into the schools in NSW and Victoria, in the face of substantial opposition from educators and parents. This morning, it was revealed that Sydney's Rose Bay Public School had been closed after a suspected COVID-19 case was identified. Two nearby schools were shut earlier this month, within days of the resumption of face-to-face teaching, after students tested positive.

The governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have nevertheless declared that the school system will remain fully open, regardless of how many infections take place. They have stated only that schools with confirmed cases will be briefly cleaned before classes return.

This is part of a broader back-to-work campaign, aimed at creating the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit making. Those sections of the workforce that were

not compelled to remain on the job throughout the pandemic are to be forced to return, despite the health risks.

Governments across the country, moreover, have collaborated with the trade unions throughout the health crisis to ensure that hundreds of thousands of construction and manufacturing workers never left their frequently crowded places of employment.

Significantly, the sections of the ruling elite that have been most vociferous in their denunciations of the protests have also been the most cavalier about the health consequences of reopening the economy.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper has, over the past three days, published more than a dozen articles and editorials condemning the demonstrations and demanding that state governments forcefully prevent them. The paper, however, has also campaigned for months against lockdown measures, declaring that even if they may have saved lives, their cost to big business has been too great.

The governments and the corporate media are preparing the ground to blame any second wave of the pandemic, that would result from their own rushed reopening of the economy, on protesters. They are insisting, moreover, that "double standards" cannot be permitted, meaning that measures to contain COVID-19 should be scrapped because mass demonstrations have taken place.

The hysterical campaign against the rallies is a warning to the working class. Governments are well aware of widespread social and political opposition. The attempts to ban peaceful protests are a prelude to state attacks on the struggles of the working class that will emerge in opposition to a pro-business onslaught on wages, jobs and conditions that is being unleashed by governments and the trade unions.



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