Massive police display of force against Australian protests

Mike Head
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Up to 1,000 police, many from the riot squad, conducted a government-ordered show of force in Sydney last night to block a planned protest against police violence and indigenous deaths in custody. The police mobilisation sent a threatening message of intent to suppress rising political and social discontent.

A wall of police, many reportedly drawn from outside the city, manned barriers around Sydney Town Hall and surrounding locations. They prevented demonstrators from gathering to continue the large-scale Australian involvement in the global protests triggered by the police killing of George Floyd in the US.

When protesters shifted to nearby Hyde Park, the police moved against them there, preventing them from rallying or marching, and ordering them to disperse.

Conducted on the false pretext of enforcing COVID-19 social distancing restrictions—which Australian governments are overturning at breakneck speed—the massive police operation is a direct attack on the basic democratic right to protest.

As a political statement, it is no less provocative and menacing than US President Donald Trump's use of militarised police and troops to clear protesters away from the White House.

A WSWS correspondent reported: "Between 500 and 1,000 officers, a substantial proportion of them from the riot squad, basically barricaded Town Hall and its square and immediately moved against any attempts to congregate there and in Hyde Park.

"There were only around one thousand people trying to protest. The consequence was that it was more of a police rally than a rally of the public."

Another young participant said: "The police operation was enormous. I have not seen anything like this before. There were lots of riot police behind the blockade at Town Hall. There were riot squad vehicles, police in black outfits and mounted police on horseback. At Hyde Park too, lines of police stopped people from marching and funneled them away from streets."

Last night's operation is a display of the fundamental role of the police, along with the military and intelligence agencies, as the enforcers of capitalist rule. As Vladimir Lenin, quoting Frederick Engels, explained, "state power" essentially consists of "special bodies of armed men" and it "grows stronger… in proportion as class antagonisms within the state become more acute."

Clearly, the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government and its federal counterpart feared a repeat of the scenes the previous weekend when about 40,000 mostly young people defied an initial police-government ban in order to rally at Town Hall.

That weekend, more than 100,000 workers and young people all over the country joined some of the largest Australian protests in recent years. The size, spread and youthful, multi-racial character of the turnout has caused alarm in ruling circles. Their fear is that opposition to police killings and harassment—itself connected to worsening social inequality and the intensifying government-corporate attack on jobs and working conditions during the pandemic—could develop into a broader political movement.

That is why, on Thursday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for a major crackdown on protests this weekend, including mass arrests and fines.

NSW Deputy Police Commissioner Michael Willing, who led last night's police operation, gave voice to its politically intimidating purpose. Speaking after protest organisers urged people to go home in the face of the overwhelming force, he boasted: "I thought they were

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in disarray. They didn't really realise the capability that we had on the ground and what we could do."

If the organisers had not urged demonstrators to disperse from Hyde Park, mass arrests were likely. One young woman was arrested for allegedly failing to comply with a "move-on direction" and issued with a penalty infringement notice for breaching a public health order.

Other protests across the country this weekend have been banned also. As well as police violence, some of the demonstrations are over the continued detention of refugees in crowded and unsafe conditions during the pandemic.

This is a bipartisan attack. Labor Party opposition leader Anthony Albanese endorsed Morrison's call for people not to join the protests. And in Victoria, the state Labor government backed its police force in issuing fines of $1,652 each on three organisers of last weekend's huge rally in Melbourne. State Health Minister Jenny Mikakos threatened the same punishment for a refugee protest today, saying a gathering of more than 20 would breach public health directives.

All week, state and territory Labor governments joined Morrison and the corporate media in trying to incite hostility toward the protests, accusing participants of undercutting public health safeguards.

This citation of health concerns is sheer hypocrisy. The same governments, joined by other state and territory leaders, decided at yesterday's latest "national cabinet" meeting to further accelerate the scrapping of public health measures introduced to curb the coronavirus pandemic.

While protest assemblies of more than 20 are criminalised, the meeting declared that 100-person limits on outside gatherings would be abolished by next month, and crowds of up to 10,000 would be allowed in sporting stadiums. Borders will be reopened so that airlines can fully restart flights, hoping to cram hundreds of passengers into economy class cabins.

Already, clubs in NSW can have 500 people in their premises, pubs and restaurants have reopened and gyms, massage parlours and shopping mall food courts reopened this weekend. Across the country, all school students and teachers have been pushed back into classrooms without social distancing, defying opposition from worried educators and parents.

Governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, also have worked hand-in-glove with the trade unions throughout the health crisis to keep hundreds of thousands of construction, mining, factory and warehouse workers on the job despite the lack of physical distancing.

In reality, there are more precautions being taken at the protests—such as the wearing of masks—than anywhere else. The crucial difference is that the ruling class fears these demonstrations as a political threat, while the "return to work" dictates are driven solely by business profit concerns.

Far from being worried about public health, Morrison insisted at yesterday's post-cabinet media conference that a fresh "emergence of cases" was "anticipated" from the lifting of restrictions, but that would not necessarily halt "the opening up of the economy."

Morrison professed to be preoccupied with creating jobs. "I'm worried about 800,000 Australians going on to JobSeeker in the last three months," he said. That comment, however, pointed to the real anxiety within the political and corporate ruling class.

That fear is that the scheduled withdrawal of expanded JobSeeker welfare payments and JobKeeper wage subsidies in September will ignite the widespread working class discontent over mass joblessness and under-employment, and the slashing of wages and working conditions.

At the same time, the ruling class must extract, from workers' labour power and the cutting of social spending, the cost of the hundreds of billions of dollars in rescue packages handed to big business and the banks.

Last night's police mobilisation is a warning of the state repression that will be used to try to crush the struggles of the working class as the global pandemic worsens and the economic and social crisis deepens.

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