

Australian police allegedly threatened Sydney protesters with sound weapon

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Police in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, continued a crackdown against the right to protest over the weekend, deploying a large force to a Sydney rally in defence of refugees on Saturday and issuing a fine against one of the organisers for supposedly breaching coronavirus health orders.

Despite government threats and denunciations, protests in solidarity with the international demonstrations triggered by the US police killing of George Floyd have continued. Some three thousand people gathered in Perth, the capital of Western Australia, on Saturday, while over a thousand rallied in Darwin in one of the largest demonstrations in the Northern Territory in recent years.

The official hostility to the emerging movement was exemplified by a massive operation on Friday night to prevent an "unauthorised" Sydney demonstration against police violence and indigenous deaths in custody. Between 500 and 1,000 officers, many of them from the riot squad, were involved, vastly outnumbering those who sought to protest. Sydney Town Hall was barricaded and surrounded by riot cops, in a show of force aimed at intimidating growing social and political opposition.

Over the past days, further information has come to light revealing the aggressive character of the police mobilisation.

On social media, a number of participants in the Friday protest alleged that police had threatened to use a sound weapon against them, known by the name of its US manufacturer, Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD).

In comments to the media, NSW assistant police commissioner Mick Willing flatly denied the claims. "There is one issue I want to clarify out there about the alleged use of some sort of sound weapon by police," he said. "That is not the case, police officers used a normal loud hailer to issue a warning to the crowd."

Footage taken by Channel Nine at the rally and subsequently posted to Twitter indicates that Willing's

statement was false. It shows a Nine reporter in Hyde Park, where protesters had sought to assemble after it became clear that it would not be possible to gather at Town Hall.

An automated voice with an American accent clearly stated: "This is a test of the Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD)." The reporter appeared to be puzzled and concerned. The announcement was identical to that heard in videos online showcasing LRADs capabilities.

Social media screenshots from Channel Nine footage, moreover, show officers carrying a device that seems to be marked "LRAD" through the park, with a control panel similar to those displayed in promotional material for the US company.

Willing's comments appear to have been an exercise in obfuscation. It is true that the police did not use a sound weapon against protesters. Most LRAD devices do have capabilities for public announcements.

LRADs, however, are anything but "normal loud hailers." The company boasts on its website that all of its devices are equipped with "deterrent" capabilities.

In practice, this means that they are able to emit piercing alert noises, at a high frequency that causes pain and discomfort to those within range, and that can result in long-term hearing loss.

LRADs were initially designed for use in military situations and in operations targeting maritime piracy. They have been deployed against opponents of the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the past fifteen years, however, they have also been used extensively by police, especially in the United States, to disperse demonstrations.

A 2016 "Law Report" program on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National reported that more than half of the country's state and territory governments, along with the Australian Federal Police, had recently acquired LRAD devices. The NSW police

would not comment on whether they were involved in the purchases.

Some three months later, at a September 1 hearing in state parliament, then NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione admitted that his force had bought an unspecified number of LRADs at “approximately \$11,000 per device.”

The Radio National report noted the potentially catastrophic capabilities of LRADs. It featured comments from Karen Piper, a University of Missouri academic, who was present at a Pittsburgh protest against the G20 in 2009 when police activated the “deterrent” function of an LRAD.

Piper stated: “[T]his machine emits this long piercing noise. It’s a very high frequency, it really hurts your ears. I started to not feel well immediately after that. I felt dizzy and nauseous and disoriented.” Tests subsequently found that she had permanent hearing loss as a result of nerve damage.

Speaking on Radio National, University of Melbourne sound and law expert James Parker made clear that the purchase of LRADs by Australian governments was directed against protests. He warned that “It expands the nature of police/state/military authority in a certain kind of way. It makes sound itself part of the arsenal that police and military and state institutions have.”

The Friday protest in Sydney appears to be the first time that Australian police have taken an LRAD to a public gathering.

Another incident underscored the bellicose nature of the police mobilisation. An officer, apparently from the riot squad, was caught on camera making a hand gesture that has been used over the past several years to signify “white power.”

Police authorities responded by claiming that the officer did not know the meaning of the gesture, which is similar to an “ok” signal.

An identical incident occurred during an aggressive police operation to prevent protests outside the International Mining and Resources Conference in Melbourne last October. An officer was photographed making the gesture to demonstrators. His superiors claimed that he was unaware of any offence that may have been caused.

It rapidly emerged, however, that the officer was a supporter of the fascistic “alt-right,” who would have known exactly what he was doing when he displayed a “white power” hand sign. The gesture had recently been used in court by Brenton Tarrant, the Australian-born

fascist whose massacre in April last year killed 51 people in two New Zealand mosques.

The police attacks on protests in Australia over the past weeks have been overseen by the entire political establishment, including state Labor and Liberal administrations and the federal government. The claims that they have been motivated by concern over the danger of coronavirus infections at mass gatherings are a sham.

Governments are continuing to announce the rollback of the few remaining lockdown measures on a daily basis. They have explicitly declared that they are not seeking to eradicate the virus, because of the “economic cost” that this would result in, i.e., its adverse consequences for the profits of the corporate and financial elite.

In reality, the authorities are seeking to establish a precedent for the suppression of public displays of opposition, including protests. While the initial target may be the heterogeneous demonstrations sparked by the US police murder of George Floyd and anger over indigenous deaths in custody, this is directed against the working class.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered a speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia. He declared that limited relief measures for the unemployed introduced during the pandemic would be rolled-back over the coming months.

Not all of the jobs lost during the crisis could be saved, Morrison stated, and the population would need to accept substantially reduced government spending. He touted a further pro-business overhaul of industrial relations and workplace conditions, to be enforced in partnership with the trade unions. Federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese signalled a continuation of bipartisanship, stressing the need for “economic growth.”

This agenda means a frontal assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of ordinary people. Unemployment is already at levels unprecedented since the 1930s, and broad sections of the population are on a financial precipice. The ruling elites are well aware that their offensive will encounter growing opposition from the working class, which is why they are accelerating longstanding attacks on democratic rights.



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