Australian state Labor government's police arrest refugee protesters

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Acting at the behest of the state Labor government in Queensland, police arrested 37 refugee rights demonstrators in Brisbane last weekend, in the latest use of the COVID-19 pandemic to attack the right to free speech and protest.

Most of the arrests were for allegedly contravening a police direction and failing to move from a roadway after a two-hour protest permit expired. Despite earlier adhering to the permit, the demonstrators were confronted by a heavy police presence.

The police mobilisation was a show of force by the Labor government, following a massive similar operation on June 12 in Sydney, staged by the state Liberal-National government in New South Wales.

For the third weekend in a row, refugee rights groups had rallied outside the Kangaroo Point Hotel, where about 120 asylum seekers have been detained in dangerously unhealthy cramped conditions for up to 12 months.

The protest demanded the release of the refugees. Some have been in detention on remote Pacific islands for seven years, before finally being brought to Australia for specialist treatment of serious medical conditions through the now-repealed Medevac legislation.

Many of the asylum seekers have been taking part in a months-long protest on the hotel balcony against their treatment, often joined on the street by supporters. Their health concerns over their prolonged incarceration intensified after a guard employed by contractor Serco tested positive for the coronavirus in March.

With 120 people locked in the hotel, there is no room for social distancing. The resulting danger of infection is worsened by the serious medical conditions of some of the detainees, making them more susceptible to the coronavirus.

The size of protests grew after some detainees were reportedly moved to the high-security Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation facility at Pinkenba, an isolated location near the Brisbane airport.

The protests also supported the global demonstrations against police violence, triggered by the police killing of George Floyd in the US, as well as a national day of action called against the Australian government's continued detention of asylum seekers on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

The Queensland state government orchestrated last weekend's attack on the protest. The previous week, the police successfully applied to Brisbane Magistrates Court to have the gatherings limited to two hours on two side streets, effectively forcing protestors away from the front of the hotel on a main street.

Police claimed to be concerned about disruptions to traffic and how people would adhere to COVID-19 health restrictions that restricted gatherings to a maximum of 20 people.

The police application invoked one of the many state and federal laws that can be exploited to shut down or severely limit political protests. It was made under section 12 of the Queensland Peaceful Assembly Act, on the anti-democratic grounds that to allow the closure of the main street would be "unreasonable and unnecessary" and "cause undue hardship and inconvenience" to local residents, businesses and traffic.

Around Australia, governments continue to condemn protests and invoke the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to silence dissent despite racing recklessly at breakneck speed to lift all restrictions in order to reopen businesses and restore profit-making.

All the federal, state and territory governments, Labor

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and Liberal-National alike, have adopted far-reaching state powers to enforce COVID-19 measures imposed by a bipartisan “national cabinet.”

While such measures have become necessary because of the global pandemic, these powers are being utilised to silence discontent and will be used more broadly against the working class as the pandemic crisis worsens, producing mass unemployment and impoverishment.

Such attacks on the right to protest are not new. They have been mounting in recent years, partly in response to climate change demonstrations and street marches, which have been joined by tens of thousands of young people in Australia and internationally.

Last year, the Queensland Labor government introduced laws that imposed harsh fines and prison terms for people using locking devices in protests, falsely accusing environmental demonstrators of using deadly booby traps. At the same time, Australian Labor Party leaders immediately backed Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison when he denounced political protests and boycotts and vowed that his government would draft new laws to ban them.

All these policies are a reflection of the efforts by Australian governments to stifle the opposition among young people and throughout the working class. The protests against police violence, which occurred in cities and towns all over the country, despite government bans and threats, showed the social unrest building up because of widening social inequality.

Hostility to the brutal treatment of asylum seekers by Australian governments is part of this disaffection. For decades, successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have militarily turned back or indefinitely detained refugees, setting terrible global precedents.

Prolonged detention has caused severe depression and other mental health problems leading some victims to suicide or self-harm.

Capitalist governments everywhere, from the Trump administration to the European Union, are dealing with desperate migrants, fleeing persecution, poverty and war, with similar barbaric methods.

As the WSWS has highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to tear through the global population, with the disease having an especially devastating impact on the almost 80 million displaced people, the highest number on record.

Against the nationalist fumes being stoked by the capitalist governments, in order to divide the working class, working people must come to the defence of refugees and migrant workers on a global scale. They need to defend the rights of workers of all nationalities to work, live and access social and health care services in the country of their choice without fear of persecution or deportation.

As part of that fight, all the refugees held in the Kangaroo Point Hotel and other detention centres around the world must be released and receive the highest quality medical care, and their basic democratic right to asylum.

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