

Australian state government bans protest against police violence

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The government and police of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, have taken successful court action to ban a Sydney demonstration against police violence scheduled for tomorrow, in the latest in a series of attacks on the right to protest.

The effective illegalisation of the rally was preceded by a hysterical campaign by the media and political establishment.

Senior police officials and politicians, Labor and Liberal-National alike, condemned the planned gathering as "reckless." They cynically invoked the dangers posed by the pandemic, while at the same time lifting the few remaining coronavirus restrictions as part of a pro-business back-to-work drive.

Despite the obvious hypocrisy, the NSW Supreme Court yesterday upheld a police application to ban the rally. The court invoked COVID-19 restrictions prohibiting outdoor gatherings of more than 20 people, unless an exemption has been granted.

Supreme Court Justice Mark Ierace warned that the "current assessment of the level of risk... is consistent with New South Wales presently being on the knife edge of a further escalation in community transmission of the virus."

In reality, the ruling represents a further assault on basic democratic rights. It was made in the context of growing fears within the ruling elite over widespread opposition to the criminally-negligent official response to the pandemic, an escalating assault on jobs and conditions, record levels of social inequality and ongoing instances of police brutality.

No section of the judiciary or the political establishment has demonstrated the slightest concern over the health dangers posed by the reckless "reopening of the economy," being presided over by the very governments seeking to undermine the right to political protest.

The situation is particularly stark in NSW, where

virtually all restrictions introduced after the pandemic began have been lifted.

Football stadiums are permitted to have crowds of 25 percent of their seating capacity, meaning that between 7,500 and 10,000 fans are allowed to attend most Rugby League and Australian Football League matches. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has been among the most strident in his condemnations of protests, has been pictured at league matches alongside political colleagues and corporate chiefs.

Cafes and restaurants are in operation, and large venues, such as league clubs, are allowed to have as many as 300 patrons on their premises at any time.

Schools fully reopened earlier this month, in the face of opposition from teachers, parents and students. This was a day after health authorities warned of an "inherent risk" of contracting the coronavirus on public transport.

Hundreds of thousands of workers have been herded back into their workplaces to allow for a resumption of corporate profit-making. Broad sections of the working class, including those in the manufacturing and construction sector, have never left the job. They have been forced to remain at work, often under conditions where social distancing is impossible, after governments and the unions declared that their industries, including residential property development, are essential.

NSW Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian, moreover, has been among the most explicit of the country's leaders in declaring that there will be no return to lockdown measures, regardless of the spread of the disease.

Responding to a rise in infections earlier this month, which has included community transmission, Berejiklian declared that the population would have to understand that they are "in a pandemic," and "learn to live with it." "We cannot shut down every time we have a cluster of cases," she declared, because this would "create chaos for businesses."

The corporate media is utterly hypocritical in its approach. Publications that have insisted that necessary lockdown measures would have too great an impact on the corporate bottom-line have discovered a great concern for “public health,” but only when it comes to public demonstrations.

They have provided senior political figures with a platform to venomously denounce the rally organisers and the many workers and youth who are being radicalised by the global movement against police violence.

This morning, Prime Minister Morrison stated that anyone who defied the court order would be “breaking the law.” NSW Police Minister David Elliot ludicrously declared that attending an outdoor protest was “the most dangerous act that anybody could do during a pandemic.”

In fact, no cases resulted from protests earlier last month, held in solidarity with the global demonstrations triggered by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. They were attended by more than 100,000 people across Australia.

The current surge of infections in Victoria shows that the most “dangerous act” for many is to attend their workplaces, restaurants or to be residents in aged-care facilities. Some 80 percent of Victorian infections since May have been linked to workplace clusters.

Elliot menacingly declared: “There will be no shortage of police officers and resources available to make sure this illegal gathering doesn’t occur.” Attendees have been threatened with massive fines and up to six months imprisonment.

Elliot previously described demonstrations against police violence as “not my kind of cause.” He responded to the brutal police assault on an Aboriginal boy in Sydney last month by stating that he was “just as disturbed” by the child’s swearing as he was by a police officer violently throwing the 16-year-old boy to the floor.

Elliot’s comments are a warning that the police are preparing a massive show of force aimed at intimidating social opposition. Last month, more than 500 officers, most of them from the riot squad, surrounded Sydney Town Hall to prevent another “unauthorised protest.” They threatened demonstrators with a Long Range Acoustic Device weapon and made it impossible for a gathering to occur.

The Supreme Court decision followed a similar ban on the first of a series of rallies early last month. That verdict was overturned on appeal.

Given the extent of the “reopening,” the political character of the latest decision was even more blatant. As

Felicity Graham, a lawyer for the organisers, pointedly noted: “Going to the aquarium, going to sex-on-premises venues, going to football matches, these aren’t essential to our democracy. Protest is.”

Serious questions were raised, moreover, about the propriety of police conduct. NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller took to Sydney radio last week to declare that he would seek to ban the protest, before meeting with the organisers or reviewing their application. Speaking to Ben Fordham, a right-wing shock-jock, Fuller denounced protesters as “selfish” and echoed outlandish government claims that a demonstration could set the state back “five or ten years economically.”

As Graham argued, Fuller’s comments made the already anti-democratic process of seeking permission to hold a rally a “sham,” whose outcome was predetermined before it began.

The ban and the police attacks on the protests are a warning to the working class. A precedent is being established for organised social and political opposition to be outlawed, on the basis of the politically-motivated and selective application of emergency powers activated during the pandemic.

At the same time that protests are being blocked, 3,000 Australian military personnel are being mobilised to metropolitan areas, supposedly to assist the response to the coronavirus. The soldiers, who have been trained for war and to suppress unrest, not respond to an unprecedented public health emergency, are being brought into the streets as part of a broader effort to normalise the domestic use of the military ahead of social upheavals.



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