

Australian establishment gives succour to anti-lockdown protests while exploiting them for police mobilisation

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Protests in Australia's capital cities last weekend underscored the symbiotic relationship between a small, right-wing milieu that has campaigned against safety restrictions, vaccines and other public health measures during the pandemic, and a corporate, political and media establishment that is waging an increasingly hysterical campaign for the ending of all lockdowns.

The demonstrations, which appear to have been organised primarily on social media, occurred amid the country's worst COVID-19 outbreak since the pandemic began. As they were being held, Australia's daily coronavirus infections approached 1,000, the highest tally yet.

The spread of the extremely infectious Delta variant is out of control in Sydney, where the vast majority of cases are being recorded. Infections are being detected in regional New South Wales (NSW), case numbers are growing in Melbourne, the Victorian state capital, and Canberra, the national capital, and the virus has re-emerged in Queensland.

Under these conditions, some 4,000 gathered in Melbourne, in defiance of public health orders banning large public gatherings. Police immediately dispersed dozens who sought to do the same in Sydney. All up, several thousand more protesters took part in rallies in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane, where stringent restrictions are not in place.

The protests had an undeniably far-right and reactionary character. Invocations of Australian nationalism were combined with vague calls for "freedom" to violate public health measures at will, even if that jeopardises the safety and lives of others. Conspiracy theories were promoted about the COVID vaccines, while hazy warnings were issued about the pandemic being part of a plot by a "global elite" to control the population.

Extreme right-wing organisations were involved, including members of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network. They made explicit the subtext of many of the slogans adopted in the protests more broadly, openly promoting racism, especially anti-Semitism.

Disoriented layers who are not hardened right-wing activists undoubtedly took part in the protests. There is not the slightest indication, however, that the sentiments animating the vast mass of the population, and especially the working class, were at all present.

The response to the gatherings on social media was overwhelmingly one of hostility, revulsion and anger over the reckless actions of the demonstrators and their anti-social politics.

In none of the copious footage or photos posted to social media by protest organisers was any reference made to social inequality, the rise of poverty and unemployment, or the need for a fight for an increase to poverty-level government assistance payments and against a stepped-up corporate offensive against jobs, wages and conditions.

As has been the case previously, government leaders and media pundits condemned the protests. They particularly focused on the violent clashes that occurred between police and demonstrators in Melbourne.

Such official denunciations have always had an entirely hypocritical character. Governments and the financial elite have railed against public health experts' calls for safety measures and lockdowns since the pandemic began, because of their impact on big-business profit. Corporate publications, especially those of the Murdoch press, have repeatedly incited opposition to limited lockdowns, when governments have been compelled to adopt restrictions in response to the demands of epidemiologists and workers.

Last weekend, the basic political alignment between the ruling establishment and the anti-lockdown protests was clearer than ever before. Shorn of their more fascistic rhetoric and obscure conspiracy theories, what many of the protesters were saying was almost identical to the statements of government leaders.

As the protests were being held, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian were in the midst of a campaign insisting that the inadequate lockdown

measures currently in place need to be lifted imminently, even as the country's COVID crisis deepens.

Both have decried the impact of lockdowns and insisting that a "roadmap" for the lifting of restrictions, adopted by all the state, territory and federal government leaders last month, must proceed, regardless of the mass infections and deaths that will result.

In one press conference after another, and multiple interviews, Berejiklian and Morrison have declared that lockdowns are "unsustainable" and that people must "learn to live with the virus." Yesterday, Morrison warned against those who would seek to "undermine" the "national plan" for a full lifting of restrictions beginning in October, as well as those who "may fear" the catastrophic consequences of these policies.

The meeting of the vaccination targets and a phased reopening have repeatedly been touted as the path to "freedom," in a clear echo of the main slogan of the anti-lockdown marches.

Governments in Britain, the US and internationally have used similar rhetoric as they have scrapped safety measures and reopened the economy. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson proclaimed July 19 "freedom day," to mark the lifting of all restrictions, including mask mandates—a criminal move that has resulted in a renewed surge of the pandemic.

Some members of the Liberal-National Coalition have made plain the connection between their views and those of the anti-lockdown protesters. Federal Nationals MP George Christensen participated in one of the rallies in northern Queensland last month and has continued to rail against lockdowns and even mask-wearing.

Coalition Senator Amanda Stoker yesterday claimed that the protests represented public sentiment, and justified the Morrison government's reopening drive. "As we've seen with some of the protests that happened over the weekend, Australians are eager to get to the resumption of the freedoms they know and love, to get back to enjoying work and study and all of the things that make living in this country great," Stoker declared.

While inciting, stocking and promoting anti-lockdown sentiment, and seeking to do away with lockdowns in practice, the governments used the weekend's rallies as the pretext for massive police mobilisations.

In Melbourne, the 4,000 protesters were met by at least 700 police. Clashes broke out, in what police claimed was the most violent demonstration in 20 years. Footage posted online shows officers deploying capsicum spray into large crowds. Some police were decked out in equipment that resembled battle fatigues, including shields and what appeared to be adapted rifles.

Some of the protesters claimed on social media that officers had fired rubber bullets into the crowd. This was disputed by police authorities, who nevertheless admitted to shooting pepper bullets, a weapon that has not been previously used at an Australian demonstration. Hundreds of arrests were carried out.

In Sydney, the entire city centre was effectively blockaded by a force of more than 1,500 extra police, a move that is also without precedent. Ride-share companies were banned from transporting passengers into the area, under threat of massive fines. A reported 38,000 cars were turned away. Trains were prevented from stopping at city railway stations. Small groups of protesters who sought to gather were immediately set upon.

Under conditions in which government ministers are expressing their solidarity with the anti-lockdown protests, it is clear that the demonstrators were not the primary target of the mobilisation. Rather, the gatherings were used as the pretext for a show of force and a trial run, to be used against future struggles, especially those of the working class.

The police operation continues a tendency that has been evident throughout the current outbreak. The more governments have dispensed with safety and health measures, the greater has been the prominence given to the repressive state agencies.

The western and southwestern working-class suburbs of Sydney are under an effective police-military occupation. Curfews are in place there, but not in the rest of the city. Thousands of cops patrolling the streets have been augmented by 800 soldiers. Meanwhile, workers in the area are compelled to attend their places of employment, even if they are unsafe, while health and community support resources remain grossly-inadequate and testing is scaled back.

The governments are well aware that their criminally-negligent policies have already provoked mass opposition. The reopening drive, which will lead to a catastrophic increase in illness, hospitalisation and death, will only intensify this sentiment. Governments are therefore preparing the blunt instruments of repression, to be directed, not at a few thousand right-wing anti-lockdown protesters, but against the millions of workers, students and young people who want public health and social rights to be prioritised above corporate profit.



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