

# Australian police exploit extreme right-wing, anti-vax rallies to deploy new repressive weaponry

Patrick O'Connor  
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Utilising reactionary anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine rallies in Melbourne organised this week, police forces have unveiled an array of new weapons and equipment. This includes “pepper ball” firearms that shoot hard pellets the size of marbles, “stinger” grenades, and paramilitary-style vehicles and body armour.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously outlined, the anti-vax protests have no legitimacy whatsoever. A small layer of construction workers appear to have been involved in one of the rallies on Monday outside the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) office (see “Australian anti-vaccine, extreme right demonstrators target construction industry”). Numbers of reports, however, point to the predominantly petty bourgeois layers involved in the other events, including small business owners and contractors.

Politically, the rallies are dominated and led by extreme right-wing libertarian and outright fascist individuals and organisations. Some of the administrators of Telegram accounts promoting and organising the protests have previously been exposed as admirers of Adolf Hitler. Supporters of the fascistic Proud Boys and the now defunct United Patriots Front have been involved in the rallies.

The police are exploiting widespread hostility towards the protests and their homicidal calls for an immediate end to lockdown measures as the pretext for trialling new weaponry and a massive state mobilisation.

Senior police previously expressed concern over how the population would respond to the use of new, so-called non-lethal weaponry.

In 2018, police put on a display of their enhanced

firepower for selected journalists. The weapons included VKS Pepper Ball firearms, capable of firing blunt force pellets or dye markers to brand people for later arrest, baton round launchers capable of firing larger rubber or plastic bullets, stinger grenades that release nine rubber projectiles, and “sound/flash” bombs that release noise, light and smoke. This was accompanied by new body armour and paramilitary-style police vehicles.

An *Age* journalist noted at the time, “we have been given a sneak preview of gear that looks more like *Star Wars* than regulation police equipment.”

Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton declared: “It is an ugly look to see police in riot gear in a suburban street. It will be confronting to watch. We now have some equipment that has not been seen before that may alarm people.”

The Melbourne Activist Legal Support noted that the new weapons posed severe dangers.

Pepper Ball pellets, the organisation reported, “can blind, maim and leave permanent injuries depending where they hit the body,” while the baton round launcher “has resulted in significant injuries and fatalities around the world, [including last year] a 25-year-old protester [who] was killed by a rubber bullet in Paraguay.” In addition: “The flash/noise distraction grenades designed to shock and disperse crowds are routinely being used in Israel/Palestine and other conflict zones and have maimed children, can burst ear drums and generate dangerous fear and panic in crowds.”

For three years, this equipment has gone unused. Now, however, the anti-vaxer rallies have provided the police with the hoped-for pretext.

The real target of the repressive build-up is not the extreme right—many of the fascists enjoy close relations with sections of sympathising police—but the working class.

The state Labor government’s bolstering of police powers and weaponry has always been driven by the fear of social unrest and working class and youth protest, fuelled by escalating social inequality and attacks on living standards and democratic rights. Labor Premier Daniel Andrews has boasted of his “law and order” credentials. In 2016, his state government committed an unprecedented \$2 billion in additional spending to expand the police by 20 percent, with 3,100 more officers employed. The government has since boasted that its annual police spending is 35 percent higher than its Liberal predecessor.

The police operations against the anti-vax events represent a warning as to how the state is preparing to respond to a genuine movement of the working class in defence of its independent interests.

Numerous acts of police violence were recorded by witnesses and uploaded to social media. This included the gratuitous use of pepper spray on already restrained people, indiscriminate firing of plastic pellets, and one incident in which a person speaking with officers at Flinders train station was grabbed from behind by another cop without warning and body and head slammed into the concrete floor.

In another incident, a passer-by who was not involved in the right-wing protests recorded three masked men wearing khaki-coloured armour emerge from an unmarked car and aggressively force a person to the ground. These were members of the Special Operations Group police branch, an elite unit usually reserved for counter-terrorist responses and incidents involving firearms or explosives.

The confrontation recalled the police-state operations coordinated by US President Donald Trump in the final weeks of his presidency, including having unidentified police in Portland hauling protestors into unmarked vans for interrogation.

In another precedent-setting move, on Wednesday the police had the Civil Aviation Safety Authority declare central Melbourne a no-fly zone. This aimed at preventing the broadcast of aerial footage of the anti-vax rallies. Police later permitted overhead media coverage, but insisted that video broadcasts from

helicopters be delayed by at least an hour so that live police operations were not visible to protestors. The ban on live overhead coverage was subsequently overturned by the Federal Court.



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