

Australian establishment legitimises fascist political violence with anti-lockdown protests

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Public health legislation in the state of Victoria has been seized upon by powerful sections of the Australian establishment to whip a right-wing anti-lockdown milieu into an hysterical frenzy that is clearly heading towards political violence.

The proposed bill, which has yet to pass the upper house of state parliament, would give the Victorian Labor government the power to declare pandemics in the future and to institute public health measures. The laws mirror similar policies in other states and are in line with emergency powers that have already been activated during the COVID crisis. Amendments earlier this week removed aspects of the bill that had been criticised by civil liberties and lawyers' organisations.

Reading the statements of senior Liberal Party figures, sections of the corporate press and a right-wing rabble they are mobilising in daily protests, however, one would think that the legislation provided for the immediate imposition of a permanent dictatorship.

Every day, the most politically disoriented sections of the population, animated by a grab-bag of individualistic libertarianism, anti-scientific hostility to vaccines and conspiracy theories, are being told the public health laws threaten them with the worst tyranny. One does not need a crystal ball to recognise the trajectory of this right-wing propaganda. It is a clear incitement to political violence against state Labor parliamentarians, supporters of public health measures and medical professionals, such as doctors and nurses, involved in the vaccination program.

The outsized reaction to the bill is shot through with a number of contradictions. The right-wing forces are hysterically agitating against lockdowns, under conditions in which the Victorian Labor government has ended the state lockdown amid significant COVID transmission and has openly embraced the homicidal "live with the virus" mantra.

The state Liberal opposition is egging-on the protesters, even though one of their primary sentiments is opposition to COVID vaccines. The Liberal Party, at the state and federal levels, however, hails vaccinations, falsely presenting them as a silver-bullet that justifies the pro-business lifting of all other pandemic safety measures.

The seeming paradoxes demonstrate that a broader political

agenda is at work. Throughout the pandemic, sections of the ruling elite have cultivated and promoted the anti-lockdown movement, as a battering ram against any public health measures.

With the current protests, this milieu is being openly integrated into the political establishment. The purpose is to shift official politics even further to the right, and to build a base that can be mobilised against mounting social and political opposition in the working class, including to the dangerous "reopening" of the economy.

Those who have orchestrated the right-wing protests, including senior Liberal Party members, are clearly drawing inspiration from former American President Donald Trump, and the unsuccessful fascist coup attempt he led on January 6. Trump's insurrection followed several trial runs at the state level, including a plot by an extreme-right-wing group to kidnap and execute Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer, who had instituted limited lockdown measures in response to demands from auto workers and other sections of the working class.

As in the US, the Victorian anti-lockdown protests are being encouraged by right-wing sections of the political establishment. Their constituency has been cultivated through agitation against public health measures. Fascist groups are prominent in them. And they are being held outside the Victorian parliament, as it is debating the pandemic legislation, in a parallel with Trump's January 6 mobilisation, which was aimed at pressuring Congress to block the certification of Joe Biden, or if that failed, forcefully preventing it.

The iconography of the Victorian protests is deliberately Trumpian, most obviously in the Trump flags and caps that adorn a number of the demonstrators.

As at the January 6 attack, a large gallows with several nooses has been a fixture at the Victorian protests. Earlier this week, the fascists attempted a mock hanging of a blow-up doll that resembled Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews. Social media video has shown multiple protesters, including those with megaphones, speaking of their wish to see Andrews dead. Journalists covering the protest have been set upon and forced to leave.

According to *Age* reporter Paul Sakkal, as many as one in

five state Liberal MPs have “either addressed or attended protests that have featured nooses and death threats.”

Those who have attended protests at the Victorian parliament over recent weeks include senior MPs, such as shadow treasurer David Davis and shadow ministers Nick Wakeling and Roma Britnell.

Liberal MP Bernie Finn posted a selfie from one of the rallies, describing participants as “a couple of thousand of my closest friends.” Liberal spokesman for community recovery Craig Ondarchie posted a photo, captioned: “Out thanking these wonderful Victorians, outside their house—the People’s House, who have had a gut full of Daniel Andrews controlling their lives, their happiness, their freedom.”

Victorian Liberal leader Matthew Guy and federal government representatives have over recent days condemned some of the more violent rhetoric at the protests, while presenting it as the work of a few bad apples, in an otherwise legitimate and just movement.

Craig Kelly was a featured speaker at the Saturday protest. He was in the federal Liberal-National government until earlier this year. Prime Minister Scott Morrison defended his promotion of quack remedies for COVID as an exercise in “free speech.” Kelly only left the government as it began invoking vaccinations to justify the “reopening.” Still a federal MP, Kelly has joined the United Australia Party, headed by mining magnate Clive Palmer.

Alongside these representatives of the political establishment, the protests have been attended by members of the Proud Boys, as well as other fascist groups. This includes the National Socialist Network (NSN), a neo-Nazi group that reveres Brenton Tarrant, the fascist terrorist who massacred more than fifty worshippers at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Anti-fascist group, White Rose, alleged on social media that Kelly’s security guard at the Saturday protest was a known associate of the NSN and provided a photo appearing to show the two in close physical proximity. There is no suggestion that Kelly was aware of the man’s alleged political affiliation. When asked about the claims by the *Guardian*, the federal parliamentarian said he did not know the man’s politics or his name, before adding: “As far as I know he was qualified, he did a good job, he was efficient and professional and that’s all that should matter.”

The direction of the protests was indicated by an article in the *Age* today. It revealed that one man had already been charged by counter-terror officers, after posting calls online for fellow protestors to take guns to the demonstrations and to kill Andrews, while others were facing investigation for similar alleged offences.

Western Australian Labor Premier Mark McGowan, whose government previously warned that the federal reopening policies were too rapid, yesterday closed his parliamentary office, after reporting threats of violence against staff. In a bizarre incident, a man had also allegedly sought to have an

armoured vehicle delivered to the office, before being arrested by police.

The far-right protesters are widely reviled by the majority of working people. The lockdown measures Andrews instituted earlier in the pandemic were the result of determined demands from the working class, including health staff and teachers. Almost 90 percent of the state’s adult population is fully vaccinated.

The protesters are emboldened by two factors: the encouragement they have received from sections of the political establishment, and the cowardice of Labor.

Andrews has criticised the Liberals for promoting the demonstrations. But his comments have had the character of a complaint that the protests, and their hostility to vaccinations, will set back the drive to lift all COVID safety measures. In large measure, Andrews is already carrying out the program demanded by the rallies, lifting safety restrictions at breakneck speed, regardless of infections and deaths.

More broadly, Labor has played a key role in creating a political environment that strengthens the far right. It has supported or carried out incessant attacks on refugees, blamed migration for job losses and a social crisis, and feverishly promoted nationalist militarism. Labor and the unions, moreover, have rendered sections of the population vulnerable to the appeals of right-wing populists, dispensing with their earlier program of social-reformism decades ago, and imposing the demands of the corporate elite for incessant attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

The official cultivation of the far-right is a warning to the working class. As is the case internationally, amid an unprecedented capitalist crisis on every front, and widespread social anger, the ruling elite is turning towards authoritarianism and dictatorship. The defence of democratic rights and the fight against the far right, requires a socialist movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment and the capitalist system.



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