

Far-right anti-vaccine protests in Australia's capital promoted by corporate media

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“Freedom convoys,” modelled on those organised by far-right groups in Canada, Europe and elsewhere, descended on Canberra, Australia's national capital, over the weekend. The ensuing protests were the largest in a series held this year, bringing together fascistic organisations, right-wing politicians on the fringes of the political establishment and a broader milieu of highly-disoriented sections of the middle-class.

The protests and the convoy have been given extensive coverage in the corporate press. This included articles previewing the weekend's demonstrations which amounted to semi-official advertisements.

The media attention far outstripped reportage on the first nurses' strike in New South Wales since 2013, held yesterday; the widespread concern among teachers and parents over the dangerous reopening of schools during the continuing COVID surge, and the broad hostility to stagnant wages and deteriorating working conditions amid a rising cost of living.

Despite this, the right-wing rallies were sparsely attended, with no more than 10,000 attending in Canberra, even though it was a national mobilisation.

As is the case internationally, the focus was on opposition to limited vaccination mandates as the spearhead of a campaign against the handful of COVID safety measures that remain. Despite shambolic official rollouts, adult vaccination uptake in Australia is among the highest in the world, with double-dose rates well in excess of 90 percent in most states.

The hostility of most working people to the right-wing demonstrations was expressed on social media, with videos of Canberra residents confronting the rabble and condemning their attacks on public health. The protesters roamed around the generally quiet city denouncing people wearing masks, causing a scene at cafes and other businesses that request their customers

to be vaccinated, and forcing the cancellation of a popular charity book fair.

Nevertheless, the protests have been presented as legitimate and important events by politicians and media commentators, even if they have expressed concern over the more disruptive activities.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has a lengthy history of denouncing popular protests over issues such as police violence, said the right-wing demonstrators were “speaking up for the things they feel strongly about,” adding, “Australia is a free country and they have a right to protest.”

Morrison made common cause with the protesters over vaccine mandates. The federal government, he said, had only imposed them in a handful of sectors, including aged care. “All other mandates that relate to vaccines have been imposed unilaterally by state governments ... so I understand their concerns about these issues,” he said.

Yesterday, Nine Media's political editor Chris Uhlmann published an opinion piece headlined “Deplorables? No. These convoy protesters should not be ignored.” He restated the false narrative that Donald Trump had won widespread support from disaffected working people.

Uhlmann asserted: “The people in the Convoy to Canberra looked like middle Australia.” While there were fascist groups present, such as the Canberra chapter of the American Proud Boys street gang, the demonstrators were “mostly peaceful”—a description that recalls the phrase “half pregnant.”

Despite the demonstrators travelling great distances, likely at significant cost, and a core of them camping out for weeks in Canberra without apparent issues for their employment, Uhlmann insisted: “Once we would have called them working class.”

Uhlmann got to the nub of the issue, declaring that the protesters were “sick of being subjected to constant and mercurial government interference in their lives,” i.e., public health measures during a global pandemic. In reality, the limited lockdowns that Australian governments previously implemented were instituted as a result of demands from key sections of the working class, including teachers, doctors and nurses, and enjoyed overwhelming popular support.

By contrast, the bipartisan “let it rip” policies of the past two months, which have resulted in an unprecedented COVID surge, are widely opposed. That is a central reason why Morrison’s Liberal-National Coalition government is broadly loathed and in an unprecedented crisis, together with the entire political establishment, including the Labor Party opposition.

The protests rail against lockdowns and public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus, even though every government has now dispensed with them in a reckless campaign aimed at ensuring that nothing impedes corporate profit and production

Uhlmann’s and Morrison’s promotion of the rallies sought to present this “herd immunity” program as being in line with the sentiments of ordinary people, when it is clearly not.

The protesters are being brought to prominence as a battering ram against working-class opposition, expressed in the nurses’ strike and other developments. They coincide with the turn by all Australia’s governments, state and federal, to the final phase of the “reopening,” in which COVID will be treated like influenza and any semblance of a society-wide public health response will be dispensed with in the interests of corporate profit.

Uhlmann concluded the protests “might not stay peaceful. Politicians and the media should try to understand what is going on. That begins by listening to people and talking to them, not at them.”

Uhlmann has extensive connections throughout the political establishment and the state-intelligence apparatus. His employer, Nine Media, is closely aligned with the Liberal Party, while he is married to Gai Brodtmann, who retired as a federal Labor parliamentarian in 2019.

Small numbers of working people, tradesman and lower middle-class elements have been caught up in the protests. They represent a minuscule proportion of the

population, however. Their disorientation, moreover, is bound up with the role of Labor and the trade unions in creating a social crisis and a foul political atmosphere through their decades-long attacks on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

Labor and the unions continue to play the key part in suppressing any independent struggle by the working class, enabling the far-right forces to play a political role that is completely disproportionate to their size and has nothing to do with genuine popular sentiments.

The social forces dominating and leading the protests are implacable foes of the working class. Prominent at the protests is the right-wing populist United Australia Party, led by mining billionaire Clive Palmer and Craig Kelly, who was a government MP until he resigned last year.

Avi Yemeni, a right-wing agitator, also has been present. A hardline Zionist, noted for his hostility to Muslims, he is an employee of Rebel News, a global alt-right platform owned by Canadian media tycoon Ezra Levant.

Former Australian Army Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel Riccardo Bosi has repeatedly appeared at the protests in full military uniform, hinting at some sort of extra-parliamentary action if vaccine mandates are not withdrawn. Bosi worked at the Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters, the top command of the US-led wars of plunder in Afghanistan and Iraq. He now leads the “Australia One Party.”

Australian representatives of Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-Nazi party, were present on the weekend, as were other out-and-out fascist groups.

The White Rose group, which monitors far-right social media, commented on the aims of the leading protest groups, including libertarian/conspiracy theorist “sovereign citizen” outfits: “Despite claims to want a ‘bloodless revolution’ we see behind the scenes their intentions are far less hygienic,” including discussions of political violence.



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