

# Massive police raid highlights attack on protest rights in Australia

Mike Head  
23 June 2022

About 100 police descended on a bush property in the Blue Mountains near Sydney last Sunday and arrested seven young environmental activists. The huge raid featured helicopters, the paramilitary Public Order and Riot, Raptor Squad and Operations Support Group, the Dog Unit, Police Rescue and plainclothes spies.

According to the New South Wales (NSW) police, this was not a “raid.” It was a “preemptive operation” against “planned unauthorised protest activity.”

That “protest activity,” over the refusal of governments to address the escalating threat of climate change, allegedly related to possible disruptions of some locations in Sydney.

The aggressive “preemptive” raid points to the vast police powers created by barrages of anti-protest laws imposed across Australia in recent years amid growing popular unrest over global warming, flood and fire disasters, public health and education crises and the soaring cost of living.

In a bid to justify Sunday’s operation, NSW Police alleged the activists were “practising, rehearsing and constructing items” for protests. That claim demonstrates how such laws can be used to conduct raids against anyone accused of planning protests.

Statements by climate activists connected to Blockade Australia, as well as their lawyers, indicate that the police provoked a confrontation with a group of people on the property as a pretext for the massive police mobilisation and arrests.

NSW Police claimed that plainclothes officers in an unmarked police car “feared for their lives” after being confronted by people on the property. But lawyers for the activists said they surrounded the car in an attempt to understand who the strangers were and what they were doing on the property.

Mark Davis, from Sydney City Crime, the law firm

representing the protesters, said police had no legal basis for being on the property. Davis said police were repeatedly asked to identify themselves. “The protesters kept asking who they were and the police walked away, before an unmarked car pulled up and they got in,” he said. “The protesters surrounded the car, demanding they identify themselves.”

The Blockade Australia group posted on its Facebook site: “We were surrounded at dawn by men in cammo gear, hiding in the bush, with heaps of guns. Then helicopters started buzzing overhead. Police cars and buses came speeding through the neighbourhood, lights and sirens wailing.

“Police dogs and black clad men in body armour and full face helmets came barging into our space. This massive, costly police operation is aimed at preventing climate activists from taking action.”

The police operation resulted in young people being rounded up and photographed. Seven were arrested, bundled into police vans, charged with offences such as affray, assaulting or hindering police and destroying or damaging property, and denied bail.

The Blockade Australia group has said it is planning to “converge” on Sydney from June 27 to “blockade the streets of Australia’s most important political and economic centre and cause disruption that cannot be ignored.”

NSW Police established an entire unit, named Strike Force Guard, after earlier such protests in March. The state Liberal-National government, backed by the opposition Labor Party, seized upon these protests to introduce expanded anti-protest laws in April that contain sweeping language criminalising demonstrations that disrupt roads or any “major facilities.”

Under the Roads and Crimes Legislation Amendment

Act a person causing “disruption” or “damage” on any “major road” or “major facility”—that is, any tunnel, road, bridge, railway station, port or infrastructure facility designated by the government—can be punished by up to two years’ imprisonment and/or a \$22,000 fine.

As the state parliament’s upper house was debating this anti-protest law, thousands of public hospital nurses marched and rallied outside during their second 24-hour statewide strike within six weeks, fighting against low pay, impossible workloads and dangerous under-staffing. Despite an exception in the law for “industrial”-related protests, workers’ protests against such shocking conditions could be ruled as non-“industrial.”

Kieran Pender from the Human Rights Law Centre provided some idea of the potential for this law to be used to outlaw many kinds of protests. He wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

“The new provision is so broad and vague that almost all protest activity without prior approval now risks criminal sanction. Imagine school children gathering at a park in Sydney to protest against inaction on climate change. Say the large turnout means that protesters spill out into the entrance of a nearby railway station. They do not pose any safety risk, but commuters have to walk around the children to access the station. Those protesters—our children—could be imprisoned, for the crime of causing commuters to be ‘redirected.’”

Vehemently defending the legislation against such condemnation, NSW Minister for Metropolitan Roads Natalie Ward declared that she introduced the bill because, “quite simply, I wasn’t prepared to have a small group of selfish, disruptive protesters continue to hold our state to ransom.”

She claimed that the government was “not denying the right to protest,” just striking the “correct balance” between the right to peaceful protest, and “the right for people to safely get on with their lives.” That supposed “balance” eviscerates the right to protest, effectively handing governments and the police vague powers to ban any conduct branded “disruptive.”

Sunday’s police mobilisation is part of an escalating offensive, by Coalition and Labor governments alike, against protests that threaten business interests. In 2019, police mobilised in Melbourne by the Victorian state Labor government violently attacked several

hundred climate change protesters who sought to oppose a global mining conference at the city’s convention centre. Many people were arrested and dragged off, and at least one woman was hospitalised after police horse charges.

Increasingly, bipartisan anti-protest laws designed to protect corporate profits have been pushed through federal and state parliaments. These laws include a 2019 federal bill that can see people jailed for up to five years for using social media, emails or phone calls to promote, or even advertise, protests against agribusinesses.

In the same year, Queensland’s state Labor government rushed new anti-protest laws through parliament. Demonstrators using proscribed obstruction “devices” can be jailed for up to two years and police have expanded powers to conduct personal and vehicle searches without judicial warrants.

The targets of this authoritarian drive go far beyond the mounting climate change protests to the broader growing opposition to falling real wages, sky-high living costs and glaring social inequality.

What alarms the ruling class and its political servants, both Labor and Coalition, is the rising anti-capitalist sentiment among young people and workers, which finds no voice within the political establishment.

Anti-protest laws have nothing to do with protecting the public from “unsafe” protests. That is a smokescreen for attacking basic democratic rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom to organise.

Sunday’s police operation is a warning of the repressive measures that will be used as the federal Labor government—elected with less than a third of the primary vote at the May 21 election—moves to meet the demands of the financial elite for deeper budget cuts and the suppression of workers’ wages struggles.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**