

Climate change protester jailed for 15 months in Australia

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Last Friday, a young woman who briefly blocked one lane of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a protest over governments' refusal to halt climate change was jailed for 15 months and then denied bail for an appeal.

This chilling punishment highlights the resort by Australia's governments—Labor and Liberal-National alike—to draconian anti-protest laws to try to suppress opposition to their pro-business agenda. This includes protecting the fossil fuel super-profits being made by the coal, oil and gas conglomerates on the back of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The jailing of Deanna “Violet” Coco is designed to send a wider message of intimidation directed against any protests that cut across the interests of the corporate elite. She was the first person to be sentenced under laws introduced by the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government in April that impose fines of up to \$22,000 and jail terms of up to two years for protests on roads, rail lines, tunnels, bridges and industrial estates.

The state's Labor Party opposition backed the legislation, which is specifically designed to outlaw protests that affect business operations.

Sydney magistrate Allison Hawkins sent Coco to prison for 15 months, with a minimum of 8 months before possible parole, for Coco's role in a climate protest on April 13, when she parked a truck on the bridge and stood holding a lit flare, intended as a distress signal. This protest blocked one of the bridge's five city-bound lanes during the morning peak for about 28 minutes, before police removed her and others.

Coco pleaded guilty to seven charges, such as interfering with the safe operation of a bridge, using or modifying an authorised explosive [the flare] not as prescribed, possessing a bright light distress signal in a

public place and resisting arrest. She was also fined \$2,500.

Coco's lawyer, Mark Davis, argued his client deliberately planned to not block all traffic, and other lanes of traffic were able to move in the same direction. Police alleged the protest blocked an ambulance with its sirens on, but Davis refuted this.

After being convicted, despite lodging an appeal immediately, Coco was refused bail, even after her mother offered a \$10,000 surety. She will remain incarcerated at least until an appeal hearing in March.

Coco had been granted bail after her initial arrest, had complied with all bail requirements and posed no flight risk. Davis said refusing bail for a non-violent offender who had abided by their previous bail conditions was “extraordinary” and at odds with usual practice.

Magistrate Hawkins focussed on the political intent of the protest. She declared there was an “intended element of planning” in Coco's actions. “You stopped during peak-hour having obtained a flare and truck, and the banners and glue, to halt peak-hour traffic in the city at that particular time with the aim of gaining maximum exposure,” Hawkins said.

Hawkins accused Coco of engaging in “childish stunts” that had let an “entire city suffer,” even though only one bridge lane was blocked. Moreover, the protest was clearly motivated by genuine and serious concerns over the dangerous warming of the planet's atmosphere. For this, the magistrate told Coco she was “not a political prisoner,” but “a criminal.”

The NSW government, through Attorney General Mark Speakman, backed this criminalisation of dissent. Speakman issued a statement on Friday evening claiming that “the government supports the right of all individuals to participate in lawful protest and dissent.” But, he insisted, “this had to be weighed against the

right of ordinary members of the public to move about safely and freely in their day-to-day lives.”

That logic effectively eviscerates the basic right of protest, because protests in public places necessarily impact on other people’s movements to some degree. NSW Council for Civil Liberties president Josh Pallas condemned the ruling, pointing out: “Peaceful protest sometimes involves inconvenience to the public. But inconvenience is not a sufficient reason to prohibit it.”

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet yesterday brushed aside such objections and personally hailed Coco’s jailing. “If protesters want to put our way of life at risk, then they should have the book thrown at them and that’s pleasing to see,” he said. NSW Labor opposition leader Chris Minns echoed him, saying he did not regret supporting the laws.

The attack on protest rights goes well beyond NSW and the issue of climate change. Over the past several years, the Labor Party has taken the lead in a wider drive by Labor and Coalition governments across the country to outlaw many forms of anti-corporate political protest. This has taken place amid growing political discontent in Australia and worldwide, particularly over worsening social inequality, deteriorating living conditions and ecological disasters.

Queensland’s state Labor government rushed new anti-protest laws through parliament in 2019. Demonstrators using proscribed “devices” can be jailed for up to two years and police have expanded powers to conduct personal and vehicle searches without judicial warrants.

In the same year, the Victorian state Labor government mobilised police who violently attacked several hundred climate change protesters opposing a global mining conference at Melbourne’s convention centre. Many people were arrested and dragged off, and at least one woman was hospitalised after police horse charges.

Also in 2019, the then federal Labor opposition helped the Morrison Liberal-National government push through parliament laws that could see people jailed for up to five years for using social media, emails or phone calls to promote, or even advertise, protests against agribusinesses.

The targets of this repressive drive are not just climate change protests but the broader opposition to big business, which finds no voice within the political

establishment. The anti-protest laws have nothing to do with protecting the public from “unsafe” protests. Rather, they attack basic democratic rights, including free speech, freedom of movement and freedom to organise, in order to protect corporate profits.

Coco’s protest was conducted under the banner of a recently-formed climate protest group, Fireproof Australia. She told the *Guardian* in April that the group was designed to be more disruptive than Extinction Rebellion, a similar formation to which she previously belonged.

Her comments gave a sense of the political frustrations driving such organisations. “We tried protesting to the politicians,” she said. “We’ve tried one-day marches. Nothing happened. And so now we need to escalate these disruptive tactics.”

These frustrations, also expressed more broadly in student climate change demonstrations, are understandable. For all its pretences of acting on emissions reduction, the Albanese Labor government is continuing to support the fossil fuel giants whose exports underpin Australian capitalism. Moreover, last month’s 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 27), in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, largely abandoned inadequate decisions from previous such events. All available scientific data show that greenhouse gas emissions—the main cause of global warming—continue to rise 30 years after the first world climate conference in Rio de Janeiro.

“Disruptive tactics,” however, provide no answer to this existential planetary crisis. It results from an economic system—that of capitalism—based on rival nation-states and the subordination of every aspect of economic life to the profit and enrichment of a small minority. What is required is the development of a socialist movement of the international working class and the overthrow of capitalism. The defence of the right to protest and other fundamental democratic rights is an essential aspect of that struggle.



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