Australian climate activist Violet Coco speaks on her jailing for Sydney Harbour Bridge protest

Our reporters
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On December 2, Deanna "Violet" Coco was jailed for briefly holding up one lane of traffic on the Sydney Harbour Bridge on April 13 to protest governments' refusal to halt climate change.

In a serious attack on basic democratic rights, Coco was initially sentenced to 15 months' imprisonment, with at least eight months without parole, and denied bail. She was the first to be sentenced under laws introduced by the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government to 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.

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet personally hailed the ruling, stating that protestors who "put our way of life at risk … should have the book thrown at them and that's pleasing to see." Echoing Perrottet, NSW Labor Party leader Chris Minns said he did not regret supporting the new laws. Labor governments in other states have adopted similar anti-protest laws, explicitly designed to protect business interests.

Coco appealed her sentence and was subsequently released on bail on December 13. At least a dozen other activists face imprisonment under the laws. One spent nearly four weeks in prison before being bailed on charges of organising protests after a massive police raid on a rural property near Sydney. WSWS reporters spoke with Coco last week about her protest and the precedent set by her jailing.

World Socialist Web Site: What was your aim in the protest and what were the issues bound up with it?

Violet Coco: The reason I have been a front-line activist for the last four years and taken the actions that I have that led to my imprisonment is the climate and ecological emergency. The fact that the scientists say that on our current trajectory we face hell on Earth conditions. This means billions of people will die if we don't have immediate action on the climate. That includes zeroing out on fossil fuels and restoring our ecosystems. This has to be done at emergency speed. We have no time to waste.

One of the things we were specifically concerned with during that campaign was the fact that our firefighters don't have the tools they need to protect us during the next fire season. Climate breakdown is causing our fire seasons to extend and also in the northern hemisphere. We used to hire our firefighting planes from the northern hemisphere, but that is no longer possible. We need to have an Australian-owned aerial firefighting fleet.

WSWS: In the comments you gave to the media you explained that you'd been trying everything else, that governments are not listening, and the political establishment is going the other way. Why did you feel you had to resort to such a protest?

VC: During the [2019–20] bushfires myself and a large team of people organised non-disruptive protests outside parliament house and thousands and thousands of people turned up. There was a petition to declare a climate and ecological emergency, which at the time was the largest-ever petition submitted to the Australian parliament and it was ignored.

We've organised non-disruptive protests, we've done the petitions, we've done one-day marches, and still our government is sending $22,000 a minute to the fossil fuels industry in subsidies. The Australian government is failing its duty of care.

WSWS: In tandem with the anti-protest laws has been the introduction of anti-strike laws that were first introduced by Labor, upheld by the Liberal-National Coalition, and increased in the last industrial relations bill that just went through parliament. Why do you think there's been such a barrage of anti-protest and anti-strike laws over the past few years?

VC: People are becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of action on the climate and ecological emergency and that is a threat to the people who are making a lot of money off the fossil fuel industry. The more we make noise about the climate and ecological emergency the more they are threatened. It makes sense that they are going to try and silence us, and we can't let their bullying tactics get in the way of protecting the habitability of our planet.

WSWS: What are the political implications of the fact that both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition support the implementation of these laws to defend the profits of big business?

VC: It is clear that our politics has failed us and what we need is a different form of democracy to resolve this emergency situation. I have done a lot of work with Extinction Rebellion, who promote citizens assemblies. It is a form of deliberative democracy with a random and representative selection of the population, informed and facilitated. A bit like jury duty, but for legislation.

We cannot trust either Labor or the Liberal-National Coalition to act in our best interest.

WSWS: What about the question of economic power? You can have assemblies but the financial and economic power is still held in the hands of the billionaires. Isn't that the root of the problem? Can we really change the situation without taking that power away?

VC: State capture is an emerging problem around the globe with oligarchs manipulating public perception through control of the media, most notably the Murdoch media.

I have to say, it is strange to me that these billionaires are not more supportive of action on environmental protection because you can't

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eat money. There is nowhere to hide from climate breakdown.

It is appalling that these people live in such extravagance while people go hungry and our natural world crumbles. Importantly, a majority of emissions are caused by these billionaires. They should be held to account for that, but mostly my concern is fixing democracy. Most likely that will end in fairer taxing of the rich, and other mitigations for the power they currently hold.

WSWS: You were initially jailed and denied bail. Why do you think that was, and what sort of precedent do you think that sets? There are now reports of a dozen or so other protesters facing similar persecution.

VC: It is very concerning. Clearly, we were facing a system of injustice that day. I am not sure what was going through the magistrate's mind when she gave me that sentence or refused bail but I am very glad on the second chance there was an opportunity for an appeal and bail. It is really concerning to see the increasing vilification of peaceful protestors, which is such an important part of our democracy and I really hope those laws are repealed.

WSWS: What do you think of Labor's support for those laws? The state Labor Party leader Minns reiterated Labor's vote for them after you were jailed.

VC: These laws are a blatant attack on our democracy. Obviously, Labor can't be trusted. The two major parties are supporting, and are supported by, the fossil fuel industry. It is a disgrace.

WSWS: Do you have any comments on our article on your jailing?

VC: It's an excellent form of journalism. I am grateful for everybody who is paying attention to the fact that our democracy is under attack. This is not just about me, but all of our rights to protest.

WSWS: You've previously mentioned your support for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Could you speak about what you think of his persecution and the connection with these laws?

VC: Julian Assange is a hero. WikiLeaks was a brave act of exposing the truth. It is clear he is being made an example of. It's unjust. Julian needs to be brought home now.

It's very concerning when people doing the right thing face state repression. There have been three other climate protestors in Australia jailed for peaceful protests this year. They were sentenced to three months' jail, and they got out on bail. People need to be really careful about what is going on in Australia right now. Tim Curry and Max Cerny were jailed for disrupting Port Botany, under disrupting infrastructure laws. Andrew George was sentenced to three months for invading a football field and setting off a flare. I was really shocked.

This is also a global trend, with 20 activists being held in remand prison in the UK for five weeks now. This was for discussing organising a protest on a zoom call.

We cannot let this scare us into inaction though because climate breakdown will be way worse than anything they can throw at us, and we have so little time left to make a difference, that we must act now.

WSWS: In 2010 when the persecution of Assange began, we said that this was going to be used as a precedent. The attack on Assange was not just on him or even WikiLeaks but any journalists, or any workers who wished to oppose the trade union bureaucracy, or the companies, or the government and that the implications of this would be felt all around the world.

VC: It's true, people have warned me not to stand up against the ruling class because they have a monopoly on violence and dominance. It's easy for them to commit such an attack on our freedom, or worse... However, it's just too important of an issue to be silent. Also, remember, we are stronger together.

WSWS: Our position is that protest is not sufficient and that the problem is the capitalist profit system itself and therefore the task is to develop a movement in order to overturn it. What do you think about those points?

VC: When it comes to needing more than protest there are always several avenues that are important to engage when making social change. However, it's important to consider the appropriate response to the threat. If we sit and ponder what is really happening, how much is at stake, then a lot becomes justifiable in response.

For example, if a bus was coming down the street and we needed to step in front of that bus to save our child's life, most people would do that easily. They would suffer a lot to protect their loved ones from an imminent threat. It's harder to see that correlation in our current situation, but this really is an emergency, and we really need to step in front of that bus for everyone's sake.

What I am trying to say is that we all should be acting as if our house is on fire. If the house is on fire, you don't go to the movies, or work, or anything until you put out the fire.

There are important things we can learn from the history of social change, like if any movement has managed to engage 3.5 percent of the population at one time on an issue they have never failed to make the change needed. Also, non-violence is twice as likely to succeed.

I think that mass civil resistance against the ruling class, who are destroying the habitability of our planet, is the most powerful way to reshape our trajectory. It's time now to engage.

WSWS: We have seen mass opposition to the policies of the governments, particularly in 2019 and 2020 after the bushfires, when you had some of the largest climate change protests in history, and of course 2003 was the biggest anti-war protest in history, but all of them failed.

VC: Those large protests were just one-day marches. We need to sit on the road and stay, like the Indian farmers just did. That would include mass strikes as the people on the road are likely to be the workers. It would be great to see strong unions supporting workers to strike for a liveable planet.

WSWS: That is an important point about mass strikes. That is where the power is, in the working class, the vast majority of the population, which does control the means of production. You mentioned the unions before, but we have no confidence or support for them. They have been suppressing workers for a long period of time.

VC: It would be great to see the workers really take on the power they have, but we also have the youth movement and the grey power movement who have a lot to say and a lot of power. I will be watching them too.

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