

Australian Nazis treated with kid gloves, pro-Palestine protesters vilified and threatened

Oscar Grenfell
27 October 2023

As has been the case internationally, protesters in Australia opposing the genocidal bombardment of Gaza have been vilified and denounced by the political and media establishment. The mass peaceful rallies have even been threatened with government and police bans.

The cynical campaign is based on lies. It is an attempt to criminalise the enormous opposition that exists to Israel's genocidal actions, which are proceeding with the full support of the Australian Labor government and the entire political set-up. A particularly pernicious component of the mudslinging has been the assertion that any hostility to the plainly criminal actions of the Israeli state constitutes anti-Semitism.

This argument trivialises anti-Semitism, and is itself anti-Semitic, conflating the Jewish people with the criminal actions of a militarist state that functions as a US beachhead in the Middle East. Masses of people, including many Jewish people, are opposed to Israel, not because they are anti-Semites, but because they are hostile to the mass murder of oppressed Palestinians.

Anti-Semitism, throughout the current epoch, has above all been a phenomenon of the fascist right directed against the working class and nurtured by sections of the ruling elite. A glimpse of this reality is provided by the official treatment accorded to actual anti-Semites and Nazis.

Yesterday, Thomas Sewell and Jacob Hersant fronted a Melbourne court for sentencing, having previously pleaded guilty to "violent disorder" charges. Sewell and Hersant are the leaders of the National Socialist Network (NSN), an avowedly neo-Nazi organisation that is open in its glorification of Adolf Hitler and its support for his genocide of European Jewry.

The pair received a lenient sentence. Sewell was handed a jail term of just over a month, Hersant three days as well as 200 hours of community work. With

time served, both are free men.

Whatever the intricacies and legal opinions of that judgment, it is the comments that were made during sentencing that have triggered significant shock on social media.

According to the *Age*, Judge Kellie Blair told Sewell and Hersant: "I consider that in both of your cases, your prospects for rehabilitation are good. Good luck with the future gentlemen."

The *Age* reported that prior to that cordial farewell, "Judge Kellie Blair said the pair were both young fathers who had little prior contact with the criminal justice system and their offending was at the lower end of the spectrum."

Sewell and Hersant walked out of the courtroom, with the latter immediately declaring before the assembled media: "Australia for the white man, Heil Hitler." Hersant began to raise his arm in a Nazi salute before lowering it. The gesture was recently made illegal in Victoria. State police later issued a vague statement that they would "investigate" Hersant's actions.

The highly unusual references to Hersant and Sewell's prospects for "rehabilitation" were made after court proceedings during which their own lawyers had indicated the pair were unlikely to abandon their racist and genocidal world outlook.

The incident for which they were sentenced took place in May 2021. Sewell and Hersant had been leading an NSN hiking party in Victoria's Cathedral Range, replete with Nazi flags and other fascist regalia. The entire purpose of such offensive displays is to provoke fear and potentially confrontations with ordinary people.

Several members of the public who were travelling in a car photographed the group.

The *Age* reported: “Masked group members smashed the windscreen and passenger window, threatening them with knives. Hersant reached into the car in an attempt to keep it from leaving, the court heard. The driver of one of the cars drove into a rock while trying to escape, before restarting the car and dialling triple zero.”

Notwithstanding the reference to the pair’s limited encounters with the criminal justice system, it is the second time that Sewell has been convicted of a violent offense in the past 12 months. The previous conviction was over a March 2021 incident, in which Hersant racially taunted a security guard of African descent before Sewell beat him up.

The violent, threatening and intimidating activities of the NSN have continued.

The most extraordinary incident occurred in the early hours of October 14. NSN members, in black uniforms, many with their faces covered, marched through the Melbourne central business district. They boarded a train, some performed the Sieg Heil salute and demanded to know from passengers if they were Jewish or not. News footage shows that for at least part of their anti-Semitic rampage, the Nazis were accompanied by a contingent of state police, who simply watched on.

That incident was significant and highly disturbing in its own right, raising many questions about the attitude of the state to the fascist forces. But it was even more notable when seen in context. On the weekend of October 14-15, the state Labor government in New South Wales threatened to ban a pro-Palestinian protest in Sydney, on the grounds that it could result in incidents of violence and hate crimes. A demonstration opposing the bombardment of Gaza in Melbourne was also met by a massive police presence.

Actual Nazis, walking through Melbourne like stormtroopers and hunting for Jewish people, received a tiny fraction of the negative media coverage that the mass peaceful Palestinian protests did. This glaring disparity only underscores that the official campaign over anti-Semitism is a conscious fraud. The media is cynically using the accusation against people it knows are not hostile to Jews, while largely responding with indifference to those who are actual anti-Semites.

The NSN itself is to a significant degree the bastard offspring of various reactionary and racist media campaigns of the past decade. Its leaders, including

Sewell, began their public political activities as self-styled “Australian patriots” campaigning against the purported “Islamisation” of the country. Those campaigns were directly inspired and strengthened by the relentless official promotion of Islamophobia in the course of the “war on terror” and the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sewell and his cronies later agitated against a supposed threat posed by “African gangs” in Melbourne. Again, they were simply picking up and capitalizing on a racist campaign incited by the media and political establishment, which demonised oppressed and vulnerable minority youth.

More recently, the NSN was active in the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests. That movement was actively encouraged by sections of the political and media establishment, as a battering ram against successful COVID public health measures, which were viewed as an impediment to corporate profit-making activities.

The current torrent of filth and lies against opponents of the Gaza genocide, directed particularly at Arabs and Muslims, will undoubtedly embolden fascist groups such as the NSN further, notwithstanding their miniscule size and the immense hostility of working people towards them.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact