

Australian police violently attack pro-Palestinian protest at Sydney port, arrest 23

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Police arrested 23 pro-Palestine demonstrators last night at Sydney's Port Botany after protesters blocked an access road for more than an hour, opposing the presence of an Israeli container ship.

Contrary to false reports in the corporate media of a "violent clash," the 500-strong sit-down protest was an entirely peaceful affair until the intervention of police, including the riot squad. Protesters were hauled bodily from the road, while others feared being trampled as mounted police rode through the seated crowd.

The police violence was captured and shared widely on social media, with footage showing intimidation of demonstrators, including women and children. One video shows the crowd passing a child in a pram over their heads to safety.

Those arrested have been charged with "failing to comply with a move on direction" and "damage or disruption to a major facility." The latter charge forms part of extremely draconian anti-protest legislation, carrying a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment.

The police attack is a significant escalation of the crackdown, led by Labor governments at both the state and federal level, on protests in Australia opposing Israel's genocide.

This is underscored by the comments of senior Labor figures, who have unequivocally endorsed the police response. New South Wales (NSW) Labor Premier Chris Minns rejected "the accusation of heavy-handedness," telling Sky News that police "should be commended for their work in the last 24 hours."

Spelling out the political motivation of the crackdown, Minns said, "We cannot have a situation where our ports are blocked for commerce because one group or another has a political disagreement with another country."

Minns declared: "We can't have this situation every single week where Sydney grinds to a standstill." This, along with previous comments about the cost of the massive police presence at mass rallies, is an indication that Minns is seeking to expand the suppression of protests beyond the

ports.

Labor's federal Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil said on Nine's "Today" program, "That type of activity is utterly despicable. I hate to see violence against the police."

O'Neil's ludicrous characterisation of police riot squads and mounted units as the victims is in line with the propaganda campaign waged by Labor and the entire political and media establishment since October 7, in which opposition to genocide and Zionist oppression has been falsely equated with "hate speech" and threats to "community safety."

In fact, the incident at the port demonstrates it is the governments and the police that are the threat to the public. As they are backing Israel's unending bombardment of civilians in Gaza, the Australian authorities are threatening and now violently attacking those opposing Israeli war crimes.

Over the past six weeks, broad layers of workers and young people have taken part in repeated mass rallies around the country as part of the global movement that has erupted.

The federal Labor government, like all the other imperialist powers, has responded by doubling down in its support for the Israeli regime. Growing numbers of those attending the protests are recognising the need for direct action to cripple the Zionist war machine.

The large attendance at yesterday's demonstration, called with less than 12 hours' notice, on a weeknight and at a difficult to access port, reflects the determination of workers and young people to fight, including by taking concrete action aimed at obstructing the genocide.

Zim, Israel's largest shipping line, has the closest of ties to the Zionist state. The company immediately responded to the October 7 uprising by pledging to make all of its vessels and infrastructure available to the Netanyahu regime and its genocidal onslaught against Palestinians.

Yesterday's action, called by Trade Unionists for Palestine and the Palestine Justice Movement Sydney, was the third rally directed against Zim's operations at Australian ports. On November 8, demonstrators in Melbourne prevented

trucks carrying Zim containers from accessing the port. On November 11, a protest was held at Port Botany, although no Zim ships were present due to schedule changes made by the company after the rally was called.

These protests were promoted by Unionists for Palestine and the pseudo-left Solidarity group, as if the presence of Zim ships in Australia was a rare event, when in fact the company is a regular visitor to ports around the country. Isolated community protests pose only a minor inconvenience to Zim's operations. Even in yesterday's rally, called at short notice after the ship docked, many hours were allowed to elapse without interruption at the port.

The elephant in the room is the refusal of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which covers all of the major ports, to take any action whatsoever against Zim.

The MUA leadership, especially in Sydney, has adopted a posture of opposition to the Israeli genocide and has declared its support for the struggle against it.

But its complete opposition to industrial action by workers was spelled out at a public meeting of the Trade Unionists for Palestine at the MUA offices in Sydney on November 3. MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul Keating refused to answer a question from the Socialist Equality Party over whether the union would call strikes to block military supplies to Israel. Shortly after he aggressively pushed the SEP members out of the building.

Trade Unionists for Palestine, and Solidarity, which has the closest ties to the MUA leadership, are running cover for the union's refusal to call any strikes.

Trade Unionists for Palestine handed over the microphone to Keating last night, where he again delivered some demagogic bluster.

But on the critical issue of industrial action, Keating declared: "We demand governments take away the cloak of secrecy when it comes to the export of arms to Israel. Dock workers have the right to know what they're loading, and if it's weapons of destruction, murder and death, we need to know so that we can demand that we will not load that."

Even accepting at face value the dubious claim that the MUA is not well aware of what its members are loading on and off ships, this amounts to nothing more than an excuse for business as usual. The Labor government is completely on board with Israel's genocide. Why would it provide information that would potentially compromise it?

The conception that workers would limit their industrial action to only a particular type of cargo is absurd. Keating's remarks called into question and undermined the purpose of last night's protest, given there is no public evidence that the ship docked in Port Botany is carrying weapons.

The point that has been made by Palestinian activists and others, is that Zim has pledged its full resources to Israel's

assault. All of its operations and profits are thus components of an interconnected network that is facilitating the genocide. All Zim ships are part of this network, whether or not they are carrying fully-assembled weapons at any given time.

Keating's comments are a cynical evasion of this reality and a justification for de facto collaboration with the Israeli state.

The MUA has also repeatedly raised the country's anti-strike laws, drafted by Labor and the unions, as a reason that no industrial action has been called against the genocide. For this reason, the union leadership has insisted, protests must be carried out by the "community."

But the Fair Work Act industrial laws they cite were drawn up by Labor and the unions. The MUA remains affiliated to Labor, whose explicit policy is the maintenance of anti-strike Fair Work legislation.

The police attack is a warning: Labor governments are determined to shut down anti-genocide, anti-war protests, and will, if necessary, employ state violence to do so.

This assault on democratic rights must be opposed. Workers must demand in the first instance that all charges against those arrested last night are immediately dropped.

This struggle, together with the fight to block supplies to Israel, cannot be subordinated to the MUA and other union leaderships. Just as they enforce the dictates of governments and corporations for cuts to workers' jobs, wages and conditions, so the parasitic union bureaucracy is functioning as an industrial police force on the key issue of Gaza, enforcing industrial peace and aiding the Israeli effort.

Workers need their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the union leaderships. The massive protests have demonstrated broad support for a struggle against the genocide among working people. The next step is concrete industrial action to block the mass murder, organised by such rank-and-file committees.

Such a fight is inseparable from a political struggle against the Labor governments which are overseeing Australia's support for the genocide and the assault on those opposing it. The union leaders, Labor's most ardent defenders, are the central obstacles to this struggle.



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