

NSW police arrest more than 100 Australian climate change protesters

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In one of the largest mass arrests of recent years, police in New South Wales (NSW) detained some 109 protesters on Sunday evening. They had participated in a 30-hour maritime demonstration of 34 kayaks, surfboards and pontoons at the port of Newcastle, aimed at blocking coal shipments and the broader promotion of fossil fuels. The protest had been given police permission until 4 p.m., at which point the arrests suddenly started.

The arrests point to a deepening crackdown on the right to protest. Significantly, this is being spearheaded by Labor governments, now in office federally and at the state and territory levels across mainland Australia. The detentions indicate official fears over growing social opposition, related not only to climate change, but to Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, a broader eruption of militarism and the soaring cost-of-living.

The action, organised by the Rising Tide organisation, saw dozens and at times more than a hundred people take to the water in small vessels to prevent coal loads from exiting the port. The activists said they succeeded in delaying multiple shipments, but noted that this is only a fraction of the coal that passes through the port each year.

In comments at the protest and since, representatives of Rising Tide pointed to the increasingly catastrophic consequences of climate change. In Australia, this included one of the worst bushfire seasons in 2019-20, and massive floods in northern NSW and parts of Queensland last year that displaced thousands.

Along with their abandonment of the flood victims and others impacted by climate change, the Labor governments are doing nothing to address the underlying crisis.

The federal Labor administration cynically appealed to discontent over the issue in the May 2022 election.

Its policy is a 43 percent emissions reduction by 2030 and net-zero by 2050. Scientists have warned that both are woefully inadequate, compared with the scale of the crisis. But even these targets are entirely meaningless, with Labor approving dozens of new coal and gas projects across the country.

The protest was not a snap action or an unauthorised event. It had received prior approval from police. Demonstrators were addressed by prominent political figures, including federal Greens leader Adam Bandt and one of his predecessors, Bob Brown. The Greens, their references to the environmental crisis notwithstanding, seek to collaborate with Labor, as it greenlights fossil fuel projects and defends the whole profit system that is responsible for climate change.

Given the establishment character of the speakers and the police authorisation, the subsequent crackdown was particularly striking.

Police have claimed that approval was only until 4 p.m. on Sunday afternoon and that participants then refused to leave the port's waters. By 5:30 p.m., the port was cleared, and its operations were resumed.

The speed of the police crackdown indicates extensive prior planning. Footage on social media shows at least one police vessel approaching the activists and moving to detain them.

The police arrests were indiscriminate. Among the 109 arrested was Alan Stuart, a 97-year-old clergyman. Five children were detained.

In a statement on X/Twitter, Legal Observers NSW said five of its representatives were arrested. "Observers were present to document the actions of police and connect any protesters arrested with legal representation," it stated.

Despite being marked out with coloured vests and having repeatedly spoken to police during the event, the

observers were nevertheless hauled in. They noted that this was an attack on “the right to document and monitor protest as media and independent observers,” which “is an internationally protected right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Three of the legal observers were charged, joining more than 100 others. Even the children who participated have reportedly been referred to relevant authorities under the Young Offenders Act.

The blanket charge applied to the adult protesters of unreasonable interference by use of a vessel under section 13 of the state’s Marine Safety Act carries a maximum penalty of a \$5,500 fine. While most protesters were released on bail after being booked, two organisers, including one with impaired vision, were detained overnight in a police watchhouse. They received hundreds of dollars in fines, with a judge declining to impose the maximum fine because of their lack of a criminal history. The remaining protesters face court next year.

The arrests and charges were clearly intended to send a message that further disruptions will not be tolerated. If that were not the case, the protesters could simply have been moved on without the mass detention or subsequent charges.

Some of the motives were spelled out by NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns, who told the right-wing 2GB radio station, “I don’t support it; I’d rather it didn’t happen. We sold \$40 billion worth of coal last year.” Minns claimed that the exports, which generate massive profits for the major corporations, were necessary “if we’re going to transition our economy to renewable energies.”

While the potential fines under the Marine Safety Act are prohibitive and potentially disastrous for ordinary people, the government also has extraordinary powers that could be used to impose even more severe attacks.

Last year, Labor came together with the then-state Liberal-National Coalition government to introduce an anti-protest amendment to the NSW Crimes Act. Section 214A makes it an offence to cause “damage or disruption to [a] major facility,” punishable by a maximum sentence of two years’ imprisonment and/or a \$22,000 fine.

That law, while directed against environmental activists in the first instance, potentially criminalises a

wide range of protests and other political activities. Disruption is vaguely defined, meaning it could be applied to many actions that threaten corporate operations and profits.

The Minns government recently deployed that law against at least 23 people who were arrested at a protest last Tuesday evening at Port Botany in Sydney. The demonstrators, who included hundreds of ordinary people, blocked a road to the port in protest over the presence of a Zim ship. The Israeli Zim line last month pledged its entire fleet to aid the Zionist regime’s genocidal onslaught against the people of Gaza.

The arrests and the charges under the draconian anti-protest laws followed a brutal police assault on the gathered crowd.

In the lead-up to that action, Minns made authoritarian comments condemning protests at ports and insisting that the population could not alter official policy, either geopolitical or commercial, by exercising the right to demonstrate.

It seems likely that the stringent response to the Newcastle climate action was motivated in part by the official fears of a growing sentiment among working people to take action to challenge and block the regular presence of Zim ships in Australian ports.

While the country’s political and media establishment fully backs the mass murder of the Palestinians, major rallies have been held each week involving tens of thousands of people against the slaughter. There is a widespread sentiment that more direct action must be taken to block potential military supplies to Israel and stop the genocide.

Despite this mood, the Maritime Union of Australia has rejected all calls for industrial action by workers targeting Zim. Instead, it is enforcing industrial peace of the docks, in keeping with its close ties to the increasingly repressive, pro-business Labor Party.



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