

Australian Prime Minister Albanese hides behind riot cops, declares support for Israel at elite gathering

Oscar Grenfell
21 December 2023

Over the past two months, a popular chant at Australian protests opposing the Israeli bombardment of Gaza has been, “Albanese, you can’t hide; you’re supporting genocide.”

At an elite gathering in Sydney on Tuesday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese sought to prove that he could do both, hiding from the public while reiterating his government’s unwavering support for an Israeli regime that has murdered more than 20,000 civilians, half of them children.

Albanese was speaking to the Lowy Institute, a major foreign policy think tank, at Sydney Town Hall.

On an early weekday evening, amid office workers commuting home and tourists meandering, the area around the Town Hall was transformed into something approaching a police encampment.

A substantial contingent from the riot squad was on hand, as were various individuals in suits who gave the distinct impression of working for the intelligence services. Police helicopters hovered menacingly overhead. The whole thing was presided over by a gaggle of senior police, alternately huddling in conclaves, marching around and giving the troops directions as in a battle.

Nothing, it was clear, would be permitted to interfere with Albanese’s address.

A crowd of protesters grew to several thousand. They were effectively kettled in Town Hall Square, which has been diminished in size due to construction work, resulting in a tight squeeze. When, after listening to several speeches, a portion of the crowd turned in the direction of the steps leading into Town Hall, they were met by a line of riot police.

The cops effectively surrounded those at the front of the protest, lest they get anywhere near the Town Hall entrance, still some ten metres away.

The crowd, while chanting, was entirely peaceful, and the police response was plainly excessive. Dignitaries, dressed to the nines, were ushered towards the building by the

police, their expressions worried and, at times, bewildered, as though they could not fathom why people would be upset about the levelling of Gaza. Several paused at the top of the Town Hall steps to take pictures of the crowd below like it were an oddity.

Passers-by were sternly instructed to keep moving, as if a portion of George Street, one of the busiest in the city, had become a restricted security zone.

After a standoff lasting 20 minutes or more, the protesters returned to the Square for more chanting and speeches. The riot police nevertheless rapidly formed a line, guarding the pavement of George Street from a crowd that had walked in the opposite direction, effectively from nobody. The absurdity notwithstanding, the formation showed that the police were employing techniques, such as securing and holding ground, that would be used in riots.

Albanese was nowhere to be seen. Like a fugitive, he must have entered the building through a back entrance or likely an underground carpark.

Transcripts of Albanese’s remarks indicate he did not mention the unusual circumstance that his speech was being delivered in a building protected by a phalanx of riot police from thousands of people denouncing him as a war criminal.

The prime minister had the audacity to describe his government’s response to the Israeli onslaught as “principled.” That would only be true if the principles being referenced were support for genocide, ethnic cleansing and militarist barbarism.

Like governments internationally, Labor has undertaken a slight shift in rhetoric, not substance, over recent weeks. Whereas at the beginning of the Israeli bombardment, Albanese and Labor ministers were cheering on the slaughter, now they have begun to profess concern for “civilian lives.”

The same line has been peddled by the Biden administration, even as it uses its veto powers to block any

ceasefire resolutions in the United Nations and ensures urgent deliveries of bombs so the Zionist regime does not run out of munitions to murder Palestinian children.

Albanese's comments made clear the phony character of this shift, intended solely to dampen public anger. He stated, "Australia recognises that Israel has the right to defend itself—and the way it does so matters."

Legal experts have explained that Israel has no such right to "defend itself" from threats, real or concocted, emanating from territory that it illegally occupies. Under that framework of international law, the Palestinians, including armed organisations from among their number, have an absolute right to resist occupation, including through force.

Albanese said his government favoured "pauses," such as that which took place late last month. Such pauses imply an indefinite Israeli military campaign. It would be like calling for the Nazis to turn off the gas chambers for a few days, once every while.

Albanese referenced his support for "international efforts towards a sustainable ceasefire." That vague formulation, committing his government to nothing, was shown to be cynical window-dressing by what came next.

Hamas must "stop using Palestinian civilians as human shields," Albanese said, parroting Israeli propaganda used to justify the mass murder of civilians. Hamas also had to "lay down its arms" and surrender, he declared, days after the Zionist military shot dead Israeli hostages walking towards them shirtless and with white flags.

All of this was a call for a continuation of the genocide, not its end. Albanese absurdly referenced the ultimate need for a "two-state solution" under conditions where Israel is seeking to complete the ethnic cleansing of all Palestinians, including from Gaza and the West Bank. Australia, moreover, abstained on a UN resolution acknowledging permanent Palestinian sovereignty over the Occupied Territories this week.

The rest of Albanese's speech was along similar lines, aggressive militarism coated with pseudo-humanitarian pabulum.

He boasted that Australia was one of the largest non-NATO contributors to the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, with the carnage in that country, provoked and instigated by Washington, presented as a defence of the international "framework of freedoms and fairness."

While the decrepit Ukrainian regime, presiding over a police-state dependent on imperialist backing and awash with Nazis, was Albanese's exemplar of those fine values, "peace" and "prosperity" were the order of the day in the Indo-Pacific.

Again, Albanese was not actually referring to "peace" and "prosperity" but to a vast US military build-up aimed at

preparing for a catastrophic war with China. This has included the Labor government continuously campaigning to line states throughout the region up behind Washington. Those bullying and threatening operations were, Albanese said, an expression of the government's commitment to the "Pacific family."

He presented Australia's acquisition of US nuclear-powered attack submarines as yet another step towards "peace and security." Of course, their only conceivable purpose is to conduct offensive operations in the region, including off the coast of China.

Above all, Albanese extolled the US alliance. "The people of Australia and the United States share a history of sacrifice in the cause of peace, we hold a common commitment to democracy, freedom and equality," he proclaimed.

The values of US and Australian imperialism are best measured in the mountains of dead bodies in Gaza. It should terrify the peoples of the Indo-Pacific when Albanese and other imperialist politicians proclaim their commitment to enforcing those "values" in this region.

The entire event, from the police-state response to protesters, to Albanese's militarist remarks, exposed the character of Labor as a rotten instrument of imperialism.

Albanese, of Labor's left faction, heads a government committed to genocide abroad and an authoritarian crackdown on those opposing the mass slaughter at home. His administration has given a bonanza to the military and the ultra-wealthy, while presiding over the worst reversal of working-class living standards since World War II.

The event exposed the fraud of the line peddled by fake-left groups, that Labor can be pressured to end its support for the genocide. At the protest, a speaker from one such group, Solidarity, hailed Labor's vote earlier this month in favour of a non-binding ceasefire at the UN. She said this showed that Labor was responding to "pressure" from below.

Albanese's remarks showed the pseudo-left to be liars, the last line of defence for war criminals.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwwsws.org/contact