

Australian police assault pro-Palestinian protesters at Melbourne dock

Patrick O'Connor
23 January 2024

A massive police mobilisation on Monday violently broke up a four-day demonstration at Port Melbourne's Webb Dock which had disrupted the operations of an Israeli Zim cargo ship.

In an operation that was undoubtedly authorised at the highest levels of the Victorian state Labor government, more than 200 police were deployed against around a hundred peaceful protesters, including officers on horseback, plainclothes police, and members of the Public Order Response Team, riot police.

Police assaulted numerous people, including by using pepper (oleoresin capsicum) spray. Nine people were reportedly charged with trespass and another for criminal damage.

One protester, Tom, afterwards spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I was just sort of being pushed along and then I turned around," he explained. "It all happened very quickly, but the next thing I knew something was being sprayed on me. I knew what it was, but it didn't start stinging for at least 30 seconds to a minute, and one of the first aid people there saw me and was like, 'you need to get attention right now.' Once they sat me down and tried to clean it off, that's when it really started to burn."

"Then someone came over and said to us that the police are moving this way and trying to push people out. They told police that I was receiving treatment for having been pepper sprayed and the response that they got was, 'well they're going to have to move and if they can't move you're going to have to pick them up and move them.' I heard later from people that the cops tried to pepper spray those first aiders that were assisting me in moving me on."

Lawyers with the Melbourne Activist Legal Support organisation observed the police operation and have

issued a "preliminary statement of concern." This raised multiple issues:

- "A person in a wheelchair was grabbed and dragged out of their chair by police. After having been jostled some distance away from the chair, police aggressively yelled at them to get up off the ground."

- "Multiple uses of OC (Pepper) spray against people who were not posing any direct threat to police, in ways to move people from an area. On Saturday morning (20.01.24), a person lying face down on the ground was sprayed point blank at both sides of their face by a police officer leaning over them. OC spray was also used multiple times during Monday evening (22.01.24) in ways that appeared outside of guidelines. Use of OC spray outside of VicPol guidelines is unlawful and may constitute assault."

- "Severe mistreatment and use of force against medics and people being treated for the effects of OC spray. On Monday evening (22.01.24) several areas established by medic teams to treat injured people were charged and cleared by police without warning. On multiple occasions, police pushed and used force against medics while they were treating people and against people who were clearly affected by OC spray. Police refused to hand over medical equipment caught behind rapidly moving police lines. At least one medic was arrested."

- "Police crowd control manoeuvres designed to clear the area on Monday evening appeared unplanned, chaotic and dangerous, escalating conflicts and causing immense anger, confusion and distress. At one point, a line of police horses actively pushed people towards the M1 freeway. At other times people were being charged by running police, given rapid and conflicting directions, and pushed into moving vehicles or through bushes or gardens."

The violent police operation follows a similar Sydney wharves last November.

It underscores the Australian ruling elite's acute sensitivity to any solidarity actions for the besieged people of Gaza that affect corporate operations. The chief executive of Victorian International Container Terminal, Bruno Porchietto, told the *Age* that in addition to the Zim ship, five vessels had been prevented from operating because of the four-day protest and that about 50,000 containers had been unable to leave.

The "community picket" had been led by a few dozen pro-Palestinian activists, but wharf workers courageously refused to cross the line for the first two days. Under the federal Labor government's antidemocratic industrial legislation, enforced by the trade unions, solidarity stop work action is illegal. The workers reportedly cited health and safety concerns instead.

Employers began to stand down workers over the weekend. An online crowd funding campaign to cover lost wages quickly raised \$20,000 for them.

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) bureaucrats then intervened. The *World Socialist Web Site* understands that union officials informed protest organisers on Sunday morning that they did not support the action and that it should be shut down. The day after that the police moved in and smashed the picket. The MUA, along with every other union, has since said and done nothing in response to the state assault.

The Australian trade union bureaucracy is complicit in the Gaza genocide. In mid-October, shortly after the Israeli onslaught began, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions Gaza and 31 other unions and professional associations issued a global appeal for solidarity action to halt the war machine, including by blockading the export of weaponry and other war-related items to Israel. In Australia, as internationally, the unions have completely ignored this appeal.

The unions are the partners of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government, as well as state Labor governments throughout Australia. The Albanese government continues to support Israel as the death toll of innocent civilians in Gaza ratchets ever higher. Australia provides important political cover for the Zionist state internationally, including at the United Nations, exports weapons components used in the

Israeli military machine and provides intelligence via the Pine Gap spy base that is used to target Palestinians.

All this proceeds despite overwhelming opposition in the working class to the mass murder in Gaza. Dock workers and others seeking to mobilise against the genocide need to organise rank and file committees independently of the union apparatuses, fighting to develop the broadest international unity for vital solidarity actions defending the Palestinian people. This perspective is advanced by the Socialist Equality Party alone, and we encourage workers to contact us and develop a discussion on the necessary next steps.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact