

Nazis blocked from gathering on Australia Day in Sydney

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On Friday afternoon, the Australia Day public holiday, more than sixty black-clad neo-Nazis were stopped by New South Wales (NSW) Police at North Sydney train station and barred from entering the city's central business district. Precisely what they were planning remains unclear, but some sort of public march seems likely.

The individuals, members of the National Socialist Network (NSN), have previously staged menacing and provocative demonstrations in the neighboring state of Victoria. The attempted Sydney event appeared to be a national mobilisation of their membership, with police and media claiming that a majority of the NSN members were from out of state, most of those from Victoria where the group is headquartered.

While the Australia Day incident received the bulk of the headlines, police also prevented the NSN from holding a Saturday meeting at a hall in the suburb of North Turrumura and from assembling in an Artarmon park the next morning.

The NSN is a widely reviled organisation, which openly worships Adolf Hitler and is steeped in antisemitism and racism. Over the recent period, it has moved towards a more aggressive and open public presence. Its intimidating actions have been treated with kid gloves by the Victoria Police, provoking public anger.

In one instance, Victoria Police watched on as the NSN "hunted" for Jewish people in the centre of Melbourne on a late weekend evening in October. It is hard to believe that this did not violate laws relating to intimidation and criminal menace.

There is nothing remotely progressive about the NSW Police crackdown, however. It served several purposes, all of them reactionary.

One was to protect the reputation and optics of Australia Day, a key celebration of Australian nationalism. The public holiday commemorates the 1788 landing of the First Fleet, the beginning of full-scale British settlement of the country and the exterminatory onslaught against the indigenous population.

NSW Police, together with the state Labor government,

likely wished to avoid the embarrassment of open Nazis encountering or even attending official celebrations of Australia Day, while chanting openly racist slogans.

The attempted Nazi mobilisation also provided police with an opportunity to deploy sweeping powers that can be used far more broadly.

In footage of the encounter at North Sydney train station, a police officer told Thomas Sewell, the leader of the NSN: "I believe your presence in the Sydney City local government area poses a serious risk to public safety." The officer said "This is based on your ideological links, including your associates, your previous attendance and ideologically motivated public order incidents, your criminal history of assaulting members of the public and your goal of intimidating and provoking people."

That order appears to have been applied to all of the gathered NSN members, who were reportedly threatened with arrest if they did not leave.

The directive seems to be based on the Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002. In addition to wide-ranging powers for warrantless searches and seizures, the legislation provides senior police with the ability to declare that "the presence of the person (or class of persons) concerned at the public event or premises or other area concerned poses a serious risk to public safety or security." There are few constraints, with the senior officer required only to decide that "the making of the order is reasonably necessary in the circumstances."

These are draconian powers of a police-state character. The reference to Sewell's "ideological links" by the police officer is especially disturbing. Sewell is a Nazi, his ideology abhorrent. But the idea that senior police, themselves committed defenders of the status quo and representatives of the state, can determine which ideologies are acceptable and which are not, is an affront to fundamental democratic rights.

If anything, the Saturday incident is even more troubling. The police broke up a gathering of the Nazis at a meeting hall, even though it was not a public or public-facing event.

The premises were hired under a false pretext, but that is unlikely to be a police matter. Basic civil liberties related to the freedom of assembly and speech are at play.

The possibility of such powers being deployed more broadly is not a hypothetical question. The NSW Police and the state Labor government of Premier Chris Minns have been at the forefront of a nationwide crackdown on opponents of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

For an October 8 Sydney demonstration against the Zionist regime's carpet bombing of civilians, Minns approved "extraordinary" police powers to stop and search anyone in the vicinity without a warrant. While they were not actually deployed, the clear aim of the powers was to shut down the protest and intimidate participants.

On November 21, NSW Police, including from the riot squad, launched a vicious physical attack on pro-Palestinian protesters at Port Botany. The demonstrators had briefly occupied a road leading to the port to oppose the docking of a ship owned by Israeli shipping line Zim, which has collaborated in the Israeli offensive. While the protesters were entirely peaceful, footage showed the police pushing, hitting and dragging them.

Twenty-three were arrested and charged under anti-protest laws passed by the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor in 2022. The legislation makes it a criminal offence, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment, to conduct protests or any activities that could impede major infrastructure or commercial activities. Civil liberties organisations have denounced them as an authoritarian move to outlaw the right to demonstrate.

Minns' attacks on Palestinian protesters provoked significant anger. The Nazi gathering has given him an opportunity to rehabilitate the aggressive deployment of the police against political gatherings.

"Hatred has no place in NSW," Minns declared. "If these thugs try to pull a stunt like this again, they will be met with overwhelming force from the NSW Police."

Minns has also denounced the fascists over the fact that some of them were wearing face coverings. That goes hand-in-hand with a broader attempt to outlaw attempts to maintain privacy and anonymity at protests and political activities. It also dovetails with the government's "let it rip" COVID policies, which have included the lifting of all mask-mandates and an attempt to present the wearing of masks, a basic safety measure, as an abnormality.

The presentation of the NSN as an oddity, which has appeared from nowhere, is a sham. In reality, they emerged out of a far-right milieu that has been cultivated by the political set-up for over a decade.

The predecessor groups of the NSN particularly fed off the official promotion of Islamophobia in the course of the

phony "war on terror," a racist campaign by the media and capitalist politicians against supposed "African gangs," and the whipping-up of a militarist nationalism around the centenary of World War I. A continuous staple, aside from these campaigns, has been an alignment with the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee agitation that is embedded in the DNA of the entire political establishment, including Labor.

The Nazis were given a further boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which a small right-wing layer was whipped-up and mobilised as a battering ram to justify the profit-driven lifting of COVID restrictions. The positions of the anti-lockdown movement, including of the NSN, are now effectively the policy of all governments, including the NSW Labor administration.

This is part of an international process, whereby segments of the ruling elite have promoted fascistic political forces, as part of a lurch towards authoritarianism directed against growing working-class opposition to inequality, austerity and war. This tendency in world politics is epitomised by Donald Trump, an out-and-out fascist and one of the presumptive nominees for this year's presidential election.

The claim that the police are a bulwark against fascism is likewise a fraud. While the extreme-right has no mass base of support in the broader population, its positions percolate within the state apparatus, which plays an ever-more direct role in the suppression of popular opposition. The NSN has recruited among military veterans, and possibly active-service soldiers. One of its publicly-identified members is the son of a longstanding police officer.

Over recent years, there have been several indicators of outright fascist tendencies within the police, including separate instances of a police officer in NSW and one in Victoria flashing a "white pride" hand signal at left-wing protesters.

The fight against the twin threats of increasing state and police authoritarianism and the cultivation of fascistic and far-right forces requires a socialist movement of the working class, directed against the capitalist profit-system, which is spewing up the worst phenomena of the 1930s amid its deep-going crisis.



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