

Australian Labor governments escalating police repression of pro-Palestinian protests

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Over the past several days, state Labor administrations have carried out a series of violent and repressive attacks on protests defending the Palestinians.

The crackdown is undoubtedly being coordinated with the federal Labor government which has actively supported Israel's genocide in Gaza over the past five months. The aim is to intimidate and stamp out the mass anger that exists over these historic war crimes and the Australian government's support for them.

Last night, New South Wales (NSW) Police arrested 19 people at a protest at Port Botany in Sydney. The demonstrators had briefly blocked a road leading to the port to oppose the coming and going of ships from the Israeli Zim line, which in October dedicated its entire fleet to facilitating the genocide. A Zim ship had been due to arrive at midnight but came to the port earlier to avoid the action.

Footage posted to social media showed officers, including from the riot squad, violently dragging protesters who were sitting peacefully on the road.

The 19 were charged with obstructing a driver's or other pedestrian's path, failing to comply with a move-along direction, remaining near/on a major facility, and causing serious disruption.

The last charge is under draconian anti-protest legislation jointly adopted by Labor and the then Liberal-National state government in 2022. The sweeping laws make it an offence to disrupt any major commercial operation without permission, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment.

Those charged include Paul Keating, the Sydney branch secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) which covers the port. Thus far, the MUA has not indicated that it will do anything in response to the arrests. It has not even reported that the arrests have happened. That is of a piece with its refusal to call industrial action against Zim throughout the genocide.

This morning, NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns defended yesterday's arrests. "There's major implications when you try and disrupt one of the arteries of our economic growth that is NSW ports," he declared.

Minns identified himself with the police assault and slandered the peaceful protesters, stating: "NSW Police do an amazing job, it's extremely difficult to always insert them in these points of contention—sometimes violence, sometimes aggro from protesters—and they keep their heads, they keep their cool and they keep the NSW public safe."

That is a carte blanche for aggressive police attacks, which will then be blamed on protesters.

There was another concerning incident at the weekly mass demonstration against the genocide in Sydney on Saturday. As the protesters were marching in the city, three of them poured red dye on themselves, symbolising the death in Gaza. They were rapidly set upon by police.

Footage posted to X/Twitter showed at least five cops grabbing one of the three, a young man, lifting him up and putting him on the ground. Riot police pinned the young man to the ground and blocked other concerned protesters from approaching.

The attacks are not just targeting protesters, but political campaigners opposing the genocide, including in working-class areas.

On Friday night, two Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners were accosted by representatives of the Labor-controlled Canterbury-Bankstown Council and told they could not hand out leaflets against the genocide at the popular Ramadan night market in the southwestern suburb of Lakemba. A council staff member stated that discussing Gaza was "inappropriate" at the market and no "political or religious material" could be distributed.

That was an outrageous edict. Lakemba and surrounding areas have a large Muslim and Middle-Eastern population. Hostility to the Israeli war crimes and the federal Labor government's support for them is near universal.

That was not the first act of censorship at the market. A week before, a group of men had chanted "Free Gaza" and "Free Palestine." The pro-Israeli Australian Jewish Association (AJA) found footage of the chants which had been posted to social media. The AJA improbably claimed that Jewish people had been nearby, right at the moment the

chants were made, and had felt “unsafe.”

Multicultural NSW, a state Labor government agency, immediately assured the Zionists that it had referred footage of the men to the NSW Police hate crimes unit. That is, according to the NSW government, to call for an end to genocide in Palestine, at a Muslim community festival, is or could be a “hate crime” against Zionists who support the mass murder.

A WSWs article on Saturday reporting on the suppression at the night market was shared widely, provoking substantial shock and anger. In response, two Labor members of the Bankstown Council responded on X/Twitter noting that Palestinian flags were permitted at the market. They did not, however, answer the factual issues in the article.

Last night, SEP campaigners again went to the market, this time distributing the article opposing the council censorship. A council staff member took a copy of the leaflet and other staff members, including the individual who had barred the SEP from distributing leaflets two nights earlier, walked by. It was evident that the council staff, the council’s private security and NSW Police had been instructed not to harass or censor the SEP campaigners for fear of a further backlash.

The council still has not justified or explained its initial censorship, however, and there is no indication that the referral of the men who chanted for the freedom of Palestinians to the NSW Police hate crime unit has been withdrawn.

Whatever the manoeuvring by the council, it is nevertheless the case that on three consecutive days NSW Labor authorities were involved in attacks on pro-Palestinian campaigners and protesters.

The situation is not limited to NSW, but extends to the neighbouring state of Victoria which also has a Labor government.

A group describing themselves as “autonomous activists” staged a protest outside Melbourne’s Webb Dock, opposing Zim. Their attempted blockade was met with a ferocious attack. Victorian Police mobilised a mounted unit. Cops reportedly shot rubber bullets in the direction of protesters, along with flash-bang grenades. Footage on X/Twitter resembles a war zone.

The fact that similar police attacks have been mounted in the two most-populous states indicates a nationally-coordinated campaign of repression which would inevitably involve the federal Labor government.

Labor has backed Israel throughout the genocide in keeping with Australia’s alignment with American imperialism. Labor has proclaimed Israel’s “right to defend itself” as the Zionist regime massacres women and children, and levels Gaza. It also has provided material support to Israel.

Labor’s support for the genocide has resulted in immense anger. In response, Labor has issued crocodile tears over the mass civilian deaths. It has fraudulently claimed that it has a limited role in the Middle East. Labor MPs have bemoaned opposition to the genocide as “divisive” and a threat to “community harmony.” Above all, Labor, together with the corporate media, has sought to bury the ongoing mass murder.

The police crackdown is entirely in line with this strategy. It is exploiting the impasse that the mass protest movement has reached.

Throughout the genocide, the political forces that have dominated the protest events, above all pseudo-left groups like Solidarity, Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, have sought to limit it to impotent appeals to the Labor government to shift course. The inevitable and predictable result has been to dissipate the movement as Labor continues to back Israel.

The pseudo-left also has aggressively promoted the union bureaucracy, particularly the MUA, even as it has ensured industrial peace on the docks, rejecting in practice an appeal from the Palestinian unions for strike action against Zim and other genocide-related shipping.

The fight against the police repression requires a rejection of the bankrupt protest politics peddled by the pseudo-left. The task is not to appeal to the Labor governments, but to build a movement of the working class against them. Above all, what is demanded is an understanding that the genocide is a crime of capitalism, inseparably connected to a broader eruption of imperialist militarism, including the US-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and preparations for conflict with China, both of which are supported by the Labor government.

The defence of democratic rights and the fight to end the genocide and war require a socialist and revolutionary movement of the working class, in Australia and internationally. The SEP is the only political party fighting for this perspective.



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