Australian police step up targeting of anti-genocide protesters

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Police in the Australian state of Victoria have carried out a spate of arrests as part of the deepening assault on the democratic rights of protesters who have demonstrated against Israel's imperialist-backed genocide against Gaza.

An additional 12 people have been arrested in relation to the 11 September protest against the International Land Defence Exposition in the state capital of Melbourne. This comes on top of 89 people who were charged or fined on the day.

The expo brought together representatives of government with the largest weapons manufacturers in the world. The protesters were centrally raising the conference's role as a hub for planning the war crimes being carried out by Israel and its sponsors in the major capitalist centres including the US and Australia.

These clear anti-war and humane sentiments were obscured by the political and media establishment which attempted to present the protesters as a hysterical and dangerous mob.

Some 1,800 police were mobilised for the event which was attended by just a couple of thousand protesters. The Public Order Response Team (PORT), effectively the riot squad, used "flashbang" stun grenades, shot "foam" rubber bullets and indiscriminately deployed tear gas against entire groups of protesters, including those moving away from police or at a distance that posed no risk to police officers.

Yet Victoria Police claims it was the cops who were violently assaulted.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, the police mobilisation, coordinated by the state and federal Labor governments, was a clear provocation intended to create an atmosphere in which the protesters could be labelled violent.

Since the event, arrested protesters have been charged with offences including "affray" and "hinder/obstruct police." One protester has been charged with "animal abuse" for attacking a cop on horseback. Of course, it wasn't the protesters who knowingly rode the horses into the maelstrom of a protest against which police were clearly prepared to use force.

The arrest of one protester, Jasmine Duff, at her home last month was filmed. Duff is a member of the Socialist Alternative organisation.

The footage shows five police officers arresting the young woman, entering her share house without a warrant—permitted by the Crimes Act. Duff told the WSWS that an armed female police officer stayed in the protester's room while she was getting changed in case she tried to escape.

Duff and several other protesters will appear in court on 21 November.

Police have also publicly released the images of more than 20 protesters from the 11 September demonstration whom they want to interrogate, calling on the public to help identify the individuals.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has also confirmed that 14 people are now under investigation for allegedly flying the prohibited flag of Hezbollah at a protest in Melbourne on 29 September. The protests came in the wake of the murder of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, along with hundreds of civilians in Beirut, Lebanon, by US-Israeli bombs.

Hezbollah, one of the largest political parties in Lebanon, was listed as a terrorist organisation in Australia in 2021 in a hasty process which included input from Zionist lobbyists.

The AFP told a senate estimates hearing this week that 1,100 hours of footage, including police bodycam and CCTV had been reviewed to determine 14 individuals "under investigation for display of a

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prohibited terrorist organisation symbol in a public place."

Search warrants have been executed for three of those individuals and a further three protesters have been spoken to by police. The AFP also says that it has seized mobile phones and an item of clothing bearing the prohibited symbol.

In recent weeks, Labor state and federal governments, the police and media have threatened a witch-hunt against anyone flying the Hezbollah flag. A 19-year-old woman in Sydney was arrested last month and charged with the alleged display of a terrorist symbol, a serious criminal offence. She was attending rallies on the same day as the 14 Melbourne protesters now under investigation.

Immediately after the 29 September protests, the federal Labor government's home affairs minister Tony Burke said that he would "consider refusing and cancelling visas" of non-citizens caught flying the Hezbollah flag.

In a statement about the protesters being investigated for showing the Hezbollah flag released yesterday, Deputy Commissioner Ian McCartney warned that the AFP is beginning to consider that protests against the ongoing US-Israeli onslaught in the Middle East could be "urging violence against groups or advocating terrorism."

All of this has the character of a coordinated state crackdown, of an undeniably authoritarian and dictatorial character. Young people are particularly being targeted.

This has been highlighted by the violent arrest of three students at Western Sydney University last month for their involvement in a peaceful protest on campus against Israel's war crimes.

Since the genocide began more than a year ago, the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has been among the most vociferous proponents of Israel's purported "right to defend itself," to justify the war crimes being carried out. Through its military alliances with US and British imperialism, Australia has no doubt been a key actor, providing logistical support for the bombing campaigns of Israel as it has attempted to wipe out the populations of Gaza and the West Bank and spread its onslaught to Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and now Iran.

Albanese's government has led the charge in fraudulently denouncing anti-genocide protesters as antisemitic. Now, the government is openly declaring that support for Palestinian and Lebanese people who are being massacred by Israel is "terrorism."

This is a sharp warning. The anti-democratic attacks against protesters are not just directed against opposition to the genocide but hostility to war more broadly.

They come amid Australia's active support for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the preparations for the country to play a central role in US-led plans for a catastrophic conflict with China.

This broader context highlights the bankruptcy of the dominant line presented by the protest leaders, that moral appeals to the powers that be can end the governments' support for the genocide. This perspective, advanced by the pseudo-left including Socialist Alternative, is an attempt to defuse the growing anti-war sentiment and funnel opposition back behind the very parties complicit in the genocide.

The fight against the genocide and war requires a diametrically opposed perspective. That is the independent mobilisation of the working class against the Labor government, the entire pro-war political establishment and the capitalist system that is the source of the deepening barbarism. Workers must take up the defence of free speech and the right to protest as part of this fight.

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