

Sydney police officer charged with assault of pro-Palestinian protester

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A 33-year-old police officer was charged last week with assault occasioning bodily harm over the violent arrest of Hannah Thomas at a small pro-Palestinian protest in Sydney last June.

Thomas, a former Greens candidate and lawyer, had attended the gathering in the suburb of Belmore as a legal observer. It was held outside the facility of SEC Plating. The company has been accused by activists of complicity in the Gaza genocide because of claims that it has been involved in the global supply chain for the production of F-35 fighter jets.

The few dozen protesters who gathered on June 27 were met by a massive police mobilisation. The police almost immediately declared the protest “unauthorised” and demanded that the group disperse, before charging the crowd and violently arresting several demonstrators.

In the course of her arrest, Thomas received horrific facial injuries, which threatened her with the loss of sight in her right eye.

Amid substantial public shock at images of Thomas bloodied and battered, the leadership of the New South Wales (NSW) Police, along with the NSW state and federal Labor governments, defended the police assault and blamed the demonstrators, including Thomas herself.

The charging of the officer exposes those statements as a cover-up, based on slanders against the victims and a false presentation of what the cops carried out.

The police and the governments clearly hoped that the matter would go away. But Thomas has been defiant, strongly denouncing the assault on her, connecting it to a broader crackdown on pro-Palestinian actions by the NSW Labor government and initiating civil court action against the police.

Under those conditions, the charging of the officer,

almost three months after the police attack, is clearly an effort in damage-control. The aim is to present the attack as simply the result of one “bad apple” who was overzealous in his duties.

But that is simply a new stage in the cover-up. The charging of the officer coincided with information coming into the public domain, strongly indicating that the aggressive police mobilisation at the Belmore protest was planned at the highest levels.

Despite her injuries, police had extraordinarily charged Thomas with resisting arrest. Three other protesters were also hit with a range of charges. Those were subsequently dropped by prosecutors and on September 19 a judge awarded Thomas and the three others almost \$40,000 in legal costs.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* last week cited revealing statements made by police officers, contained in court documents related to those proceedings. The officers reported they had been given a briefing by unnamed police officials at Campsie police station on the morning of the protest. They had been instructed to show “zero tolerance” to the demonstration.

“My understanding at the briefing was that it was an unauthorised protest,” the *Herald* cited one of the officers as saying. They stated that they thought they were to give move-on directions to the protesters, which is what occurred.

The claim that the protest was “unauthorised” was a lie. Police do not “authorise” protests, a power befitting a police state.

There are, however, sweeping anti-protest laws on the books in NSW. One set of legislation makes it an offence to disrupt a major economic or government operation, punishable by large fines and up to two years’ imprisonment.

Another law, passed by the Labor government in

February, bars protests in the vicinity of “places of worship.” Given the many Churches and other religious institutions, and the vagueness of the provisions, that is a clear attempt to create the conditions for any protest to be deemed unlawful.

Earlier documents related to the charging of the protesters had also hinted at extraordinary anti-riot laws being at play in the police response. Under those provisions, police are empowered to impose far-reaching restrictions in a given area, including to demand the identity documents of all people present and to conduct warrantless searches.

The anti-riot powers also provide for the establishment of roadblocks and vehicle searches. Significantly, in that context, the *Herald* reported that Highway Patrol officers “had also been tasked with stopping vehicles in the area to check their ‘bona fides.’”

The dropping of the charges against Thomas and the other protesters makes clear that, whatever powers police were considering exercising, it was determined they would not stand up in court. The issue was not an “unauthorised protest,” but an unlawful police operation.

Many questions remain unanswered. For instance, the officer charged with the assault of Thomas has been described as a senior constable working in a “specialist command” in south-western Sydney. There is no indication of what that command is.

The main question is who gave the orders for the extraordinary police response to a small and peaceful protest.

Given the inevitable adverse publicity and opposition associated with such a crackdown, such an order must have come from high up in the NSW Police command. Given the political character of the police crackdown, it also raises questions about what involvement the NSW government had in approving the police actions.

NSW Premier Chris Minns has been at the forefront of the campaign to vilify and demonise pro-Palestinian protesters. He has repeatedly initiated unsuccessful court action to have demonstrations against the Israeli genocide banned, most recently when his government and the police sought to block a march over the Sydney Harbour Bridge last month attended by up to 300,000 people.

Minns effectively defended the police attack on the

Belmore protest, immediately after it occurred, declaring that people were “entitled to protest but businesses in NSW are entitled to run their companies as well.”

The response of federal Labor MP Tony Burke was even more disturbing. He declared that “no one is above the law,” not in reference to the violence of the police, but in speaking of Thomas and the other protesters. “When people were asked to move on by the police, they should have followed the police direction. Apparently, they didn’t,” he stated.

Burke is the local member for Watson, which includes Belmore, where the protest was held, and nearby suburbs, where there is a large Middle Eastern and Islamic population. There has been widespread anger in the area over Labor’s complicity in the genocide, which was partially reflected in a challenge to Burke at the May federal election by a pro-Palestinian independent.

Burke is not simply a local member, however, but also one of the most powerful figures in the government. He is the minister in charge of the Home Affairs department, which Labor expanded after the election, bringing together the Australian Federal Police, ASIO—the domestic spy agency, and the agencies responsible for attacking the rights of immigrants and refugees.

Burke thus oversees the very federal agencies that are most directly involved in attacks on pro-Palestinian supporters and opponents of war, and that have been at the centre of the Labor government’s fraudulent conflation of opposition to the genocide with antisemitism.



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