

Australian governments invoke Nazi actions to crack down on democratic rights

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The federal Labor government and the state Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) immediately responded to a small protest by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network (NSN) last month with attacks on democratic rights that could be used far more broadly.

The NSW Labor government rushed to introduce new laws, purportedly targeting Nazi ideology. The federal administration cancelled the visa of an NSN member from South Africa and is seeking his deportation.

The response serves two purposes. First, the governments are covering up the extent to which their own anti-immigrant and nationalist policies have created a fertile environment for the far-right, including the NSN. Secondly, they are seeking to exploit widespread disgust with the Nazis to set precedents that could target political opposition, especially of a left-wing and socialist character.

Those unstated motives are indicated by the highly dubious pretext for the rush to legislation and deportations.

The trigger was an NSN rally held outside the NSW state parliament on November 8. Several dozen of the Nazis stood in front of the building, carrying an antisemitic banner that called for the “abolition” of the “Jewish lobby.”

Amid public shock at such a display in the centre of Sydney, it was rapidly revealed that the NSN had notified the NSW Police of the protest. The police had not objected, effectively approving it.

The NSW Labor government and the police command came up with a series of improbable excuses, including communication failures, and claimed that the planned event had only been known about by low-level officers. Within days, however, the excuses were exposed.

Peter Thurtell, a deputy commissioner of the NSW Police, admitted that he had known of the planned rally before it was held. Thurtell, along with three other deputy commissioners, is one of the second-highest ranking officials in the NSW Police force.

Greg Piper, the speaker of the NSW parliament, said his staff had been informed that the rally would occur, the day before it did, by the parliamentary security team. Piper is an

independent, but it is inconceivable that he would have been informed, but not the leaders of the NSW government including Premier Chris Minns.

The Labor administration and the police command have subsequently provided no coherent explanation. Instead, Labor introduced its new legislation within days of the NSN protest being held.

The laws amend 2022 legislation which made it an offence in NSW to publicly display a swastika or to Sieg Heil. They do so by broadening the remit of content and conduct that is potentially prohibited, and by increasing penalties.

The legislation, if passed, would make it illegal “for a person, by public act and without a reasonable excuse, to knowingly engage in conduct that indicates support for Nazi ideology using imagery or characteristics associated with Nazi ideology that would cause a reasonable person to fear harassment, intimidation or violence or for the person’s safety.”

If the offence is prosecuted, an individual faces a year in prison. There is, however, an aggravated offence, punishable by two years’ imprisonment, if the act is conducted near a Jewish institution.

Filthy antisemitism is obviously a core component of Nazi ideology. Introducing alternative punishments for identical offences, based on the community targeted, however, is unusual. The NSN and other Australian fascists, for instance, are virulently hostile to Indigenous people and have repeatedly attacked them, but such conduct would not be classed as aggravated.

Of greater significance is the scope of the legislation.

The explanatory portion of the bill states that the objective of the changes is to “make it an offence to publicly engage in conduct that indicates support for Nazi ideology.”

In other words, this is an attempt by the state to arrogate to itself the power to determine which political ideologies are or are not permissible. Such a power goes far beyond the issue of the Nazis and is directed against the most basic precepts of freedom of political speech.

The dangers of such a precedent being expanded are

hardly hypothetical. In a speech, days before the NSN rally in Sydney, Mike Burgess, head of the domestic spy agency ASIO warned of the threat posed by the Nazis. But he also intoned against a growth of “revolutionary extremism,” which he associated with mass opposition to the genocide in Gaza.

That is part of a broader push. For more than two years, the entire political and media establishment has slandered mass hostility to the Israeli slaughter in Gaza and Australia’s complicity in it. They have deliberately conflated anti-Zionism with antisemitism, presenting those protesting the war crimes as anti-Jewish bigots, even when they are explicitly anti-racist or even Jewish themselves.

Alongside the federal Labor government, its NSW counterpart has been the most vociferous. Both governments earlier this year passed far-reaching hate speech laws, transparently aimed at illegalising strident condemnations of Zionism and imperialism. The NSW Labor government has repeatedly sought to have peaceful pro-Palestinian demonstrations banned.

Parallel with its hate speech laws, the NSW government rammed through another battery of anti-protest laws, providing the state with the power to forbid demonstrations near places of worship. Last month, the NSW Supreme Court ruled elements of that legislation were unconstitutional, noting that the ubiquity of religious institutions and buildings could be invoked to shut down all public political activity.

The strange circumstance of the NSW Police approving the NSN rally, and then the immediate rush to legislative changes in its aftermath, followed shortly after that Supreme Court decision. The timing smacks of a provocation, aimed at reversing a blow to the assault on democratic rights, and proceeding with it in another form.

The potential for legislation purportedly targeting Nazis to be used against opponents of the genocide and of war has already been demonstrated.

In 2024, a Sydney man was charged by NSW Police with violating the existing laws against public display of Nazi symbols. He had attended a pro-Palestinian protest, and had carried an Israeli flag with a swastika superimposed upon it. The very obvious point was to compare the horrific war crimes of the Israeli regime with those of the Third Reich. In other words, his actions were a condemnation of both Nazi and Zionist atrocities, not a promotion of fascist ideology. Under conditions of a media barrage, he nevertheless felt compelled to plead guilty.

The other response to the recent NSN protest was by the federal Labor government. Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke intervened to cancel the work visa of one of the Nazis, Matthew Gruter, and to direct that he be deported to

South Africa where he is a citizen. Burke employed his reactionary and far-reaching discretionary powers to cancel visas based on “bad character.”

In his public comments, the Labor leader made plain the decision was political.

“We’ve got a really strong principle here: If you’re on a visa, you’re a guest in Australia,” Burke declared. “If someone turns up for the purposes of just abusing people and wrecking the place and damaging the cohesion, you can ask them to leave.”

That is an assertion of the right of the government to banish any non-citizens, if they engage in any form of political activity that it disapproves of. Burke’s line, moreover, is steeped in the most reactionary nationalism, presenting those without citizenship as second class. Such positions parallel those of the far-right.

That is no accident. Successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have set global benchmarks for the persecution of immigrants and refugees, including abrogating the right to seek asylum and consigning many of those seeking it to concentration camp-style prisons in the Pacific. The current Labor government is demonising immigrants, including vulnerable international students, for a cost-of-living and housing crisis that is a result of its own pro-business policies.

The far-right feed off the official promotion of nationalism and xenophobia. It is striking that the NSN is seeking to formally register a political party named “White Australia,” in a homage to the racist immigration policy that was enforced by Labor and conservative governments for most of the 20th century. At the same time, by imposing cuts to social conditions, the governments create the discontent that far-right forces pitch to.

All of that underscores the fact that the fight against fascism cannot be outsourced to governments or the state, which are themselves responsible for its re-emergence. Such a fight can only be carried out by the working class mobilised against capitalism and all of its defenders including Labor.

To the extent that governments carry out repressive actions against the far-right, they are simply setting a precedent for use against the real threat to the profit system, the working class and the socialist movement.



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