

Australian union leaders support anti-protest laws after Bondi shooting

Martin Scott
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In the wake of the December 14 Bondi Beach terror attack, prominent union leaders were quick to declare their full-throated support for moves by the New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian Labor governments to introduce harsh new anti-protest laws.

The NSW legislation was passed in the early hours of December 24 after Labor Premier Chris Minns recalled parliament specifically to ram through the bill.

The laws grant sweeping emergency powers to the state's police minister and police chief to prohibit all public assemblies across the entire state once they declare that a terrorist event has occurred. An initial blanket ban can last 14 days and may be repeatedly extended, for up to 90 days in total, during which courts are barred from authorising demonstrations. These bans empower police to forcibly disperse gatherings and carry out mass arrests.

For more than two years, Australia's union bureaucracies have ensured that mass opposition among workers and young people to Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza has not been allowed to find expression in strikes to block the supply of weapons components or other war-related goods to the Zionist regime of Benjamin Netanyahu. But the support for police-state measures designed to suppress all forms of protest, expressed by Health Services Union (HSU) National President Gerard Hayes and Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) Secretary Luke Hilakari, marks a qualitative shift to the right by the union apparatus.

Speaking to the *Australian*, the right-wing Murdoch-owned outlet that has led the witch-hunt against Palestine supporters over the past two years, the two senior union officials signalled their agreement with the slanderous equation of opposition to Israel's genocide with antisemitism.

Hayes denounced pro-Palestinian demonstrators: "Have some f..king decency, quite frankly. Seriously, there are 15 people who have been killed. There are 40 people who have been put in hospital. It's obscene to continue to protest at this point in time."

This is an explicit endorsement of the fraudulent claim that the hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who have protested against the genocide are somehow responsible for the mass shooting at Bondi, and that these protests must

therefore be shut down.

In fact, there is no indication that the Islamic State-inspired perpetrators of the terror attack had any connection whatsoever with the protest movement. But their reactionary and antisemitic mass murder is being used, with Labor governments playing the lead role, to justify longstanding plans to shut down protests and criminalise dissent more broadly.

Hilakari said pro-Palestine protesters had "made all the points they need to make about Gaza" and "they just need to back off." This is an outrageous statement, designed to promote the fraud that the official "ceasefire" renders opposition to the genocide obsolete. The reality is that Israel continues to murder and starve the population of Gaza, and is openly preparing to broaden its imperialist-backed assault on the Middle East.

Referring to a banner used by pseudo-left group Unionists for Palestine declaring that "intifada is union business," Hilakari said, "I would not stand near it. I don't think that is union business because I don't think that photo, that sign, is bringing people together."

Hilakari's opposition to the word "intifada," an Arabic term for "shaking off" oppression, is a tacit endorsement of threats, most prominently by Minns, to specifically outlaw the slogan "globalise the intifada." Hayes openly declared his support for this blatant attack on free speech, according to the *Australian*.

In other words, these two high-ranking union officials have declared their alignment with the state and federal Labor governments, the Zionist lobby and the corporate media, against workers who want to fight oppression. There could hardly be a clearer illustration of the class role played by the union bureaucracy.

Hayes, a prominent figure in NSW Labor's right faction, whose backing was central to Minns' elevation to lead the party, has railed against pro-Palestinian demonstrations—in which health workers, including those covered by the HSU, have been significant participants—since the genocide began.

In December 2023, when HSU members emailed Hayes to ask if they could take union banners and flags to the weekly protests against the genocide, the union leader did not just refuse—he went to the Murdoch press to publicly attack the workers he claims to represent for daring to make the request.

In May 2024, Hayes held a behind-closed-doors meeting with

Amir Maimon, in which he later claimed to tell the Israeli ambassador that “Israel should be more focused on preventing civilian casualties,” at a time when more than 35,000 Gazans had already been killed, according to official estimates. When news of this meeting leaked out and HSU members organised a protest, Hayes denounced their opposition to his meeting in secret with a representative of a genocidal regime as “absurd” and “hard to fathom.”

Hilakari’s turn against protesters is more striking, as he has been a featured speaker at numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations over the past two years, including as recently as late August. Like the other union leaders who have occasionally postured as opponents of the genocide at these rallies, his contributions have never amounted to more than empty platitudes.

The real role of Hilakari, the VTHC and the entire Australian union apparatus has been to block strikes and suppress the opposition of workers to Israel’s war crimes and the complicity of state and federal Labor governments. Now, Hilakari is attempting to seize upon the Bondi terror attack as a pretext to lobby for the total shutdown of protests against the genocide.

While other bureaucrats have not matched the bluntness of the HSU and VTHC leaders’ support for police-state measures, not a single union has opposed the legislation. Notably, no union officials spoke at rallies held in Sydney and Melbourne on December 21 against the laws.

What stands exposed is not only the unions, but the pseudo-left organisations that have, throughout the past two years, provided political cover for their complicity in Israel’s genocide.

The role of Unionists for Palestine, led in Sydney by Solidarity and in Melbourne by Socialist Alternative, is to trap workers behind endless appeals to union officials to sanction industrial action—or even union participation in protests—against the genocide.

This was always a fraud, as was exposed at a November 2023 Unionists for Palestine meeting at the Maritime Union of Australia’s (MUA) Sydney headquarters. A member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) asked MUA branch secretary Paul Keating if the union would act on an urgent call by the Palestinian trade unions for industrial action to paralyse the imperialist-Zionist war machine.

Keating reacted with unconcealed fury, and the crowd of Solidarity members shouted down and denounced the SEP member for daring to ask the question. More than two years on, however, the MUA has not taken a single strike against ZIM or any other cargo associated with Israel.

Despite all this, the pseudo-left continue to defend the union bureaucracy, fulfilling their role in a de facto chain of command. Labor governments fund and politically support Israel’s genocide, the unions prevent workers from striking, and the pseudo-left use their left-populist and occasionally socialist rhetoric to funnel opposition to this conspiracy back

behind moral appeals to its perpetrators.

These organisations do not represent the working class, but an affluent layer of the upper middle class, and aspire to integrate themselves ever more deeply into the union apparatus and the political establishment.

The significance of the unions’ increasingly open anti-protest stance runs far deeper than the question of Palestine. What they are lining up with is a massive attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class, that will enable governments to shut down protests on any issue, virtually at will.

Fundamentally, these are wartime measures. As the crisis-ridden capitalist system descends towards global conflict, ruling classes around the world are adopting increasingly authoritarian forms of rule aimed at stamping out mounting opposition from workers and youth to the prospect of world war and the brutal austerity that will be levelled at the working class to pay for it.

The comments of Hayes and Hilakari are not an aberration, but the logical extension of the role played by the unions for decades as an industrial police force, diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class. A key component of this has been the union bureaucrats’ co-drafting (with successive Labor governments) and enforcement of Australia’s draconian anti-strike laws, which outlaw almost all industrial action.

The lesson is clear: To defend the right to protest and democratic rights more broadly, workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be fought for and built in every workplace, independent of and in opposition to the union bureaucracies. What is required is not just an industrial fight, but a political one, directed against the capitalist system and all of its organs, including Labor and the unions, as well as their pseudo-left defenders.



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