

Large “Invasion Day” protests held in Australia amid unprecedented assault on democratic rights

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of people demonstrated on Monday in “Invasion Day” rallies opposing the oppression of Indigenous people and the jingoistic Australia Day holiday which marks the anniversary of British colonisation.

In Melbourne, at least 30,000 people turned out, with around 20,000 in Sydney and several thousand in other capitals across the country. In addition to registering their anger over the poverty, inequality and police violence inflicted on Aboriginal people, many were animated by opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the Australian government’s complicity in it.

This year’s Invasion Day was held under conditions where the Labor government, federally and in the states, is seeking to outlaw that opposition. Falsely blaming peaceful mass protests against the genocide for the reactionary December 14 terrorist attack in Sydney, the governments have passed a battery of anti-democratic measures directed against political dissent.

In the week before the Invasion Day rallies, Labor passed sweeping federal legislation, providing the government with the power to ban political groups and parties based on vague assertions that they promote “hate speech.” The discussion surrounding the bill made clear that the initial target is pro-Palestinian sentiment.

The Sydney rally was held under conditions of a de facto protest ban in the city. In the wake of the Bondi attack, the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government passed laws providing for demonstrations to be prohibited by the police for up to three months in the wake of a terrorist attack, a power that the state police command has enforced.

Fearing a backlash, the police permitted the Invasion Day rallies to occur. They also allowed competing March for Australia demonstrations to be held. Dwarfed by the official Invasion Day protests, the March for Australia events featured anti-immigrant racism and fascist demagoguery, including of a genuinely antisemitic character.

In a warning of the right-wing atmosphere that

governments are cultivating, including through their vilification of peaceful protests, an individual threw a bomb into the Invasion Day event in Perth. The device did not detonate, but police have stated that if it had, there could have been mass casualties. Despite that, the individual has yet to be charged under terrorism laws.

At an official Australia Day event in Canberra, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese sounded his own anti-immigrant dogwhistle, instructing new citizens to “leave behind the burden of old prejudices and hatreds” and embrace “unity, not division.” NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns declared he would seek to pass further anti-protest laws, and depicted the peaceful mass protests against the genocide as an impermissible disruption.

The Invasion Day rallies unfolded against this backdrop, yet not a single prominent speaker on the official platforms advanced a perspective for fighting the assault on democratic rights. Instead, the platforms were dominated by a privileged layer of the Aboriginal upper-middle class—many of them integrated into state structures and bureaucracies—who framed the oppression of Aboriginal people almost entirely in racial terms and promoted the dead-end of Treaty, court cases, petitions and, above all, electoral support for the very Labor governments attacking democratic rights.

The line was most explicit in Melbourne. There, a number of speakers hailed the Treaty that was struck late last year between the Victorian Labor government and handpicked Indigenous representatives. The Treaty makes permanent a First Peoples’ Assembly, and creates mechanisms for its leaders to consult with government. It potentially expands the control of the Indigenous elite over social services related to Aboriginal people, as well as to land and natural resources.

Djaran Murray-Jackson, a reserve seat holder on the First Peoples’ Assembly, claimed that “Treaty is secure” and would “start delivering better outcomes,” but warned that

the Liberal opposition threatened to “tear down treaty and everything else that has to do with us.” While claiming he was “not telling you to vote Labor,” he insisted the crowd “put the opposition last” in November’s state election.?

Gary Murray, another Assembly member, was more direct. He praised the state Labor government for small land hand backs and bluntly added: “If the Liberals and the National Party get in, it’s all gone... We do not let the Liberals and National Party get in.”

There was a glaring contradiction. While speakers referenced the social crisis afflicting the overwhelming majority of Indigenous people, including disproportionate rates of poverty, incarceration, mortality and disease, they were hailing a state Labor administration that, together with the federal Labor government, is responsible for those conditions.

The Victorian Labor government, with whom the Indigenous elite in that state has partnered, is one of austerity and authoritarianism. It has repeatedly overseen violent police operations directed against pro-Palestinian protests, with Premier Jacinta Allan, who oversaw the Treaty, slandering opposition to the genocide as antisemitic and proclaiming her support for Israel.

On the social front, the Labor government is slashing spending on vital programs to pay for a deficit that is substantially a product of handouts and concessions to big business. The government has unveiled plans to sack up to 3,000 public servants, and is demolishing most of Melbourne’s remaining public housing stock, in a program that is displacing up to 10,000 poor and working-class people.

Under the state Labor government, the Indigenous imprisonment rate has skyrocketed, while Allan withdrew an earlier promise to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 in line with international human rights norms.

The alignment of the Indigenous elite with such a government is a graphic expression of the reality that the plight of ordinary Aboriginal people is a class question. They are the most oppressed section of the working class, and their conditions can only deteriorate amid a broader offensive against social and living conditions. For the Indigenous elite, the priority is to advance its own privileges through greater integration into the very state and government structures responsible for that oppression.

In Sydney, the promotion of Labor was more muted, under conditions where Premier Minns is among the most right-wing politicians in the country, and his government has not yet proceeded with a similar treaty. Several family members of Aboriginal people killed by police or in custody spoke movingly of their grief and anger. Their testimonies underscored the brutal reality of state violence.

But the political line was essentially the same as in Melbourne. The main speakers, including Greens and Indigenous nationalists, made passing references to the state Labor government’s assault on democratic rights, but outlined no perspective to fight it.

Lynda-June Coe, a NSW Greens member, called on people to “face Pauline and her yuppies head on.” Gwenda Stanley, leader of the “Blak Sovereign Movement,” led chants of “let’s get rid of Pauline!”

Those were references to Pauline Hanson, leader of the far-right One Nation party. Amid a crisis of the political set-up, including the disintegration of the Liberal-National Coalition last month, One Nation’s support is increasing in the polls.

But the empty demagoguery against Hanson at the Sydney rally provided no means of fighting the far right. In reality, One Nation and other far-right tendencies can only grow, under conditions where the political establishment, including Labor, has promoted a foul atmosphere based on anti-immigrant and anti-refugee xenophobia.

The far right, moreover, can make an appeal because of a social crisis that is being inflicted by Labor governments on behalf of a corporate and financial elite. Coe, as a representative of the Greens, did not mention that her party is closely aligned with the federal Labor government, including having passed regressive housing legislation that benefits the property developers and environmental laws that aid the major polluters. The calls for a fight against Hanson were a less overt expression of the same dead-end perspective as was more openly advanced in Melbourne, i.e., the call for a de facto alliance with Labor.

In opposition to this line up, Socialist Equality Party campaigners raised the necessity for a political struggle against Labor and all of its defenders, including the Greens, pseudo-left organisations and the Indigenous nationalists.

They explained that the oppression of Indigenous people can only be fought through the development of a unified movement of the entire working class, directed against the source of poverty and exploitation, as well as fascism and war, the capitalist system itself.



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