

Police rampage against Sydney protest opposing Israeli president's Australian visit

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10 February 2026

Last night, police in Sydney carried out a massive mobilisation against a peaceful protest opposing the visit to Australia by Israeli president and war criminal Isaac Herzog. A deployment involving hundreds of police culminated in cops indiscriminately pepper-spraying, bashing and charging at the demonstrators.

The protest in Sydney was part of a nationwide event opposing Herzog, attended by more than 20,000 in Melbourne, some 10,000 in Sydney, 5,000 in Brisbane and thousands more in other capital cities and regional centres.

Footage that has gone viral on social media shows multiple clear-cut assaults perpetrated by the police in Sydney.

In one video, a middle-aged man with his hands up is repeatedly punched to the midriff by a riot cop. Another shows two police officers pinning down a young man and punching him in the back. In a third, a group of Muslim men praying in Town Hall Square are set upon, interrupted and dragged along the ground for no apparent reason.

Numbers of participants have likened the rampage to the actions of the US administration of President Donald Trump in Minneapolis, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have carried out a reign of terror, including the murder of two people and violent attacks against many others.

The violence in Sydney was planned and orchestrated by Labor governments, at the federal level and in New South Wales (NSW).

The invitation to Herzog was extended by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, despite the fact that a United Nations inquiry found that the Israeli president incited genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. Albanese and every other Labor leader has insisted that Herzog must be “respected” and have fraudulently presented his trip as an opportunity for him to mourn the victims of the December 14 terrorist attack in Bondi.

The real purpose of the visit, to forcibly suppress mass opposition to the genocide and to normalise war crimes, was on full display last night.

In the lead-up, the NSW Labor government had invoked extraordinary legislation that it passed in the wake of the Bondi attack, providing the state's police commissioner with the power to ban protest marches for up to three months in the wake of a terrorism designation. Political protests and marches

in Sydney have now been banned for over seven weeks—a level of the suppression of freedom of speech almost unprecedented since during World War II.

Then on Saturday, the state administration announced the use of other laws, declaring Herzog's visit a “major event.” That was aimed at strengthening the ban on a march and activating draconian provisions under which police could control access to almost the entire Sydney central business district and its eastern suburbs.

The major event declaration was the subject of legal challenge by lawyers representing the Palestine Action Group, who stated that it was an attempt by the government to block a planned protest from Town Hall to the NSW parliament. The challenge noted that the legislation referenced tickets, spectators and advertisers, underscoring that its purpose was to administer sporting events, concerts and the like. The legislation includes a specific clause that it not be invoked to block political protest.

In a highly-political decision, Supreme Court Justice Justice Robertson Wright rejected the challenge. During the proceedings, he had invoked the Bondi attack as pointing to the dangers of violence, although it was unrelated to pro-Palestinian protests.

Wright referenced an offer by the NSW government and police for a static protest to be held in Hyde Park, which organisers had rejected because it would scarcely be visible to the general public.

The decision sets a precedent whereby the NSW government, presiding over Sydney, the country's largest city, can describe any political visit or gathering as a “major event” to prohibit demonstrations against it. Were the fascist Trump to visit Australia, it is entirely foreseeable that a similar declaration would be issued.

The decision meant that the protest was restricted to Town Hall Square, which was surrounded on all sides by riot police. Many demonstrators were prevented from entering the Square, without reason. A police helicopter hovered low over the crowd, preventing many of the speeches from being heard. Cops were also spotted on the rooftops of neighbouring office towers, with suggestions they may have been snipers.

After a series of speeches, the crowd was blocked from

marching in the direction of the state parliament. Many of the police appeared agitated and aggressive, as though they were spoiling for a fight, which is what transpired with the series of unprovoked and violent attacks.

No less significant than that display was the political response. Prime Minister Albanese immediately defended the cops, declaring the protesters had been told they would not be allowed to march. NSW Premier Chris Minns denounced the demonstrators as violent, without a skerrick of evidence. He responded to the shock produced by videos of cops punching defenceless people by insisting that “context” may have been missing from the clips.

The statements of Albanese and Minns are of an authoritarian character, and signal an offensive against any social and political opposition.

The atmosphere they have whipped up has been made clear by the response of far-right figures, who have lauded the police rampage. Former Liberal prime minister Tony Abbott hailed the fact that the police were finally taking on the “pro-terrorist protesters,” who had marched against the Gaza genocide for the previous two years. “It’s about time the fight back began. It began last night.”

Abbott blurted out the real content of the cynical invocations of “social cohesion” by Labor and the entire political establishment, to blackguard and delegitimise the mass hostility to Israeli war crimes.

As for Herzog, he abandoned any pretense that his visit was an “apolitical” display of “mourning,” as it had been presented by a complicit media. Speaking at Sydney’s International Convention Centre last night, he blamed opponents of the war crimes in Gaza for the Bondi attack. Alongside Zionist leaders, he presented references to “genocide” and “apartheid,” charges levelled against Israel by every authoritative human rights group in the world, as antisemitic.

In the context of the open embrace of genocide, militarism and police-state repression, the most striking aspect of the speeches at the Sydney rally was their paucity.

Several Palestinian activists spoke about the atrocities committed in Palestine. Jewish journalist Antony Lowenstein refuted the conflation of Zionism and Judaism.

But the event as a whole was bereft of analysis, let alone a perspective to fight imperialism and authoritarianism. Virtually no attempt was made by the speakers to refute the pretext for Herzog’s visit, namely that it was a response to the Bondi attack.

Speaker after speaker led the crowd in chants of “arrest Herzog,” without addressing the reality that the Labor governments are not about to detain the war criminal, but are instead feting him.

Federal Greens parliamentarian Mehreen Faruqi denounced Labor’s lack of “morality.” But she made no explanation as to why the Greens frequently collaborate with Labor. That included welcoming its calling of a Royal Commission in to the

Bondi attack, under conditions where it was crystal clear that it would serve not as an examination of the alleged Islamic State-linked atrocity but as an inquisition against pro-Palestinian sentiment in the universities, schools and elsewhere.

While the Maritime Union of Australia Sydney branch secretary, Paul Keating, blustered against Herzog and the invitation, his union has, for more than two years, rejected calls for industrial action targeting Israeli shipping and trade. The union remains affiliated with the pro-genocide and repressive Labor Party.

The bankruptcy of the perspective dominating the rally was summed up in the organisers’ decision to provide a platform for Sarah Kaine. She is a member of the very NSW Labor government that has sought to ban protests and aggressively defends Israel. Kaine lamented the Herzog invitation. But as some audience members noted in heckling her, she and other purported Labor dissidents are fully committed to cabinet solidarity. They have voted, in parliament, for the various tranches of anti-protest laws used against the pro-Palestinian movement.

Kaine was welcomed to the stage by Josh Lees, a representative of the Palestine Action Group and a member of Socialist Alternative. Through the genocide, Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left groups, such as Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, have peddled the lie that Labor can be pressured to end its support for Israel and for police repression through larger demonstrations and moral appeals.

As the events of last night demonstrate, those claims have provided cover for Labor as it has shifted, not to the left, but dramatically to the right. In practice, the pseudo-left has demobilised and politically neutered opposition, creating the conditions for Labor to go on the offensive.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the fight against the genocide is not a single issue, but must be based on the struggle against the eruption of imperialist militarism globally, of which the atrocities in Palestine are a component. The task is not to appeal to governments, but to organise a political struggle against them through the mobilisation of the working class, including mass industrial action. That must be connected to a socialist perspective directed against the source of the descent into dictatorship and war, the capitalist system.



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