

Australian protesters against Herzog visit speak about police attacks

Our reporters
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Following Monday's brutal police attacks on demonstrators in Sydney against the visit by Israeli President Isaac Herzog, a number of the protesters have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to report their own experiences. The following are just some of their accounts.

Sarah, a counsellor, told WSWs reporters: "The crowd was starting to disperse—the idea was to march. As we were doing that very slowly, we noticed that the police started to get their metal barriers and were putting them at either end [of the section of George St between Bathurst St and Park St]. They were also lining up all the police officers, even near the steps to Town Hall, so they barricaded us in.

"As the police officers were shutting the first gate, there was an elderly woman in a wheelchair and a child with her family that were just trying to leave. A friend of mine grabbed the gate and was trying to pull it open, saying, 'let them out.'

"The police officers didn't like that. So they got into a bit of a tussle with the gate. Another police officer came in to grab my friend. That's when I stepped in and I put my body in between the police officer and my friend, who was trying to get this gate open so these people could go through.

"The police officer pulled my Keffiyeh off and threw it on the ground and then he pushed me by my chest. I said, 'don't touch me' and went to push him back. Then he pushed me again, shouting at me, and then a second police officer came and pushed me to the ground. They were saying, 'stay there, don't f***ing move,' that sort of thing.

"Somebody helped lift me up off the ground, at which point [the cops] had grabbed my friend. About seven officers pulled him up over the barrier and then they bashed him. He's got gashes on his head, on his knees, he was covered in blood. He's got bruises all over his rib cage.

"After that, more and more officers came to that, sort of, front line and were pushing us and pushing us back. We kept saying, 'you can't keep us here, you're going to create a crowd crush.'

"We were all there for about an hour and nobody was allowed to leave. Then friends of mine, who were down the other end [of the city block], told me over the phone that the police officers there had said that they could travel south and go out that way. But when they went to do that, there were all these horses there and they weren't allowed to leave.

"After about an hour, they started to get more officers to create a really solid line. They were sort of all whispering to each other and waiting, like they were waiting for a direction. [We had the sense that] 'they're going to do something, something's going to happen.'

"They pushed us forward, just started pushing us all, physically, like on the chest. I had one officer grab me by my throat and push me

back. He was just saying, 'everybody get back.' We kept saying, 'Where do you want us to go? We can't go back. There's like 30,000 people behind us.'

"There were people falling in the crowd and elderly couples that were near me that were absolutely petrified. We were all just sort of squished on top of each other.

"Then they just pepper-sprayed all of us, just indiscriminately over the crowd. I pushed myself to the side. I had my head in my hands and my eyes shut. This lady, who I probably owe my life to, grabbed me and said, 'don't move, there's a horse behind you.' Apparently it was like an inch away from me. It got wild from there, but I was able to stay to the side, which meant that the horses came past me and I was able to leave."

Asked about the political issues behind the police rampage, Sarah said: "My opinion of police in general is that they only serve capital. They don't serve community and never have."

The violent police response to the protest "was definitely planned to create chaos and a crowd crush, to incite violence as a way to demonstrate through mainstream news that 'these protests have got to be shut down.' I think it's a show as well to demonstrate Australia's alliance with not only Israel, but the US and imperialism in general."

Speaking about the effect of the genocide radicalising workers and young people worldwide, including in Australia, she said: "I think that the powers that be know that and they want to stifle any possible movement or possible revolution. They're trying to maintain the status quo."

Karl, a retired IT worker, was punched in the head, his glasses smashed, and within seconds pushed face down on the ground and hit by two police officers, who then said he was being arrested for assault and handcuffed. Ten minutes later he was released without charge. He spoke with the WSWs yesterday about the attack and the false media reportage of the events.

Karl: We've got ultra-right shock jock stations, like 2GB, coming out criticising everyone for standing up against a war criminal. I saw a few media reports about what happened on Monday, but why don't they talk to some of the many Jewish people protesting against the genocide on Monday night. Why not interview some of them?

WSWS: And now Labor and the media are doubling down and defending the police violence.

Karl: They did indeed, and have justified the brutality. I saw some incidents on social media afterwards and, of course, I experienced it myself. I saw a line of police, probably 10 metres away from me and I turned my back and was walking down George Street. And within seconds, I didn't know what happened. They came down and punched me and pushed me to the ground, smashed my glasses and then said I

assaulted them. Really?

The mind boggles that they claim this. When our governments and police think this is okay then they've definitely lost any respect I had for police. It's shameful how the truth is twisted. We live in a first world country, a so-called democracy.

Now if someone tells me about police brutality, I know exactly what they mean. I've had first-hand personal experience of it. I now have a totally different view, not just on policing but on a lot of other things.

Gabrielle told WSWS reporters: "After an hour of police blockading all sides of the crowd, a small group of people managed to bypass the blockade and head towards Central Station. Officers then started pushing protesters together into what felt like a kettle crush.

I saw a few people go down after being peppered sprayed and suddenly the person beside me, who was waving a Palestinian flag, was being dragged from the crowd and pinned to the ground by police. They shoved myself and many others out of the way so they could violently conduct their procedures.

They charged towards us with pepper-spray in hand. At one point the majority of people running either side of me were screaming and crying for help after being sprayed or running over with water bottles to help those who had been sprayed.

This all came to a head at the intersection between Pitt and Bathurst Street, where layers of police started sprinting towards us. Most of us were able to escape onto Pitt Street.

I'm sure the images of that night will remain with everybody who attended that protest for many years to come.

Gina wrote: I'm 56. I have been to two demonstrations in my entire life, and one of them was at Town Hall on February 9 and it broke my heart.

I thought it was important to be at Town Hall, not only because of the unforgivable welcoming to Australia of a war criminal (from a country that has killed over 70,000 human beings and continues to execute and mutilate civilians during the 'ceasefire,' while making plans for the land once they manage to clear it of the 'pests') but also because of the continued rushed and thoughtless legislation to suppress civil rights.

I managed to be in Town Hall Square before the police surrounded us and stopped others from entering. When the speeches were over, the police refused to let anyone leave and I was introduced to a new word: "kettling" the trapping of people in a limited area in an attempt to cause discomfort, distress and intimidation.

For more than an hour, the police refused to let anyone leave and, as night began to fall, without warning, they began pushing those gathered to the far end of the square.

I was shoved by the police several times while obeying instructions. One of many devastating realisations of the night was the number of police who were smirking and smiling at being able to use force.

I was lucky. I managed to get out from in front of the police with only shoves.

I'm horrified by the police action that took place, forcing demonstrators towards Central Station with lines of police and riot squad and horses, refusing to allow the crowd to disperse naturally down blockaded side streets.

They charged without warning and pepper-sprayed our old, our young, our neighbours, our work colleagues, our friends, our family, multiple times. They victimised the infirm and the unarmed.

They felt the need to kidney- and head-punch multiple times a young skinny man on the ground, whose arms were already secured behind his back by two police, and charged him with assault for

biting. Your fist coming into contact with someone's teeth multiple times while you are punching them in the head is not biting.

They assaulted people with their arms above their heads, they pushed over and trampled and pepper-sprayed people who were not moving fast enough to suit them.

My belief is that the NSW premier and police hierarchy were embarrassed by the size of the turnout (and their disorganised response) to the Harbour Bridge March. That was the first protest I attended and I was there when contradictory police instructions were being shouted from helicopters, officers on the ground and received in text messages, while the peaceful crowd of all ages, genders and backgrounds did their best to cooperate and do what was asked of them.

[On Monday] the Labor government and police wanted to make an example to discourage future demonstrations of any kind.

The gathering at Town Hall to listen to speakers was not illegal. There was no justification to refuse what would have been another peaceful march from Town Hall to parliament. If there was real concern for 'public safety,' the police would not have kettled those gathered and violently forced them through the city. The police, as instructed by the premier, were the instigators.

Those brutalised on Monday night suffered the indignity of a further assault when the NSW premier and the police spokesperson proceeded to present alternative 'facts' for what had occurred and the prime minister mouthed platitudes about 'bringing down the temperature.'

Most media did not hold them to account or even challenge their assertions. They shamefully propagated the lie that those gathered to voice disagreement with the decision to invite Herzog, in defence of civil freedoms, in the spirit of community, were at fault for police violence.

This has been a stark reminder that our political leaders are not here to represent the people. That the police are not here to protect but to control and suppress.



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