

Australian filmmaker James Ricketson speaks with WSWs about police violence at Sydney Town Hall

Richard Phillips
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Australian documentary filmmaker James Ricketson was attacked and arrested by New South Wales (NSW) riot police outside Sydney Town Hall on Monday night. The 76-year-old was among scores protesting the visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog who were assaulted by police.

In June 2017, Ricketson was arrested in Cambodia and falsely accused of spying for unspecified "foreign states" while filming poverty in Phnom Penh. Imprisoned for 15 months, he was found guilty after a three-week trial in August 2018 and sentenced to six years' jail. Ignored for months by the Australian government, Ricketson was freed only after more than 100,000 people signed a petition demanding Canberra intervene.

Ricketson spoke with the WSWs this week about the brutal police assault on the Sydney Town Hall demonstrators.

Richard Phillips: Can you describe what happened on Monday night?

James Ricketson: I was at the demonstration with my sign, wandering around, bumping into a few old friends and chatting. I couldn't hear the speakers properly, so at about seven o'clock I sat on the wall outside the Town Hall.

The police were off to my left, and the horses were there, but they weren't doing anything. They were just standing around. In my few interactions with the cops up to that point, they'd been perfectly reasonable. They weren't being heavy, nasty, vicious or aggressive. Then something changed.

The energy was going out of the rally. People started wandering down George Street past the Town Hall, very casually. They weren't marching anywhere; they were just trying to cross the road to catch a train or bus or go to dinner. Suddenly the police said, "No, you can't come this way."

I told them, "I just want to go to the railway station and catch a train." They said I'd have to walk up to the KFC and go around that way. I said, "That's ridiculous," and went back to sit on the wall.

Then they clearly received instructions to move forward. They started advancing like a big battering ram—about a dozen cops in a line with more police behind them—slowly pushing people who wanted to head north back to the south. At the same time there were people coming from the south, from the rally, who wanted to cross the road, which meant you had two flows of people and a police line driving into them.

RP: And that's when it turned into a kettling operation by the police?

JR: Yes. There was a crush of people, and I just happened to be

there. There was a skirmish between a guy and a policeman a few feet from me and then the whole thing erupted.

The cop standing next to me suddenly pushed me. You can see this in the footage. I wasn't even looking at him. He shoved me, I put my hand on his shoulder—you can see that in the video—and the next thing I was on the ground. Four or five cops were on top of me, kneeling and punching, pressing my head into the ground, and then they dragged my hands behind my back to handcuff me with zip ties.

In the process, though I didn't realise immediately, I scraped and gashed one elbow and damaged the other. I've got bruises all over me and can't use my left leg because it's swollen, and there's a very sore area under the right-hand side of my rib cage. I've spent most of today trying to get into hospital or to get x-rays.

The police quickly went from being reasonable to being vicious dogs. They must have received an order from somewhere in the chain of command to create chaos, which, of course, was required for [NSW Labor Premier] Minns and the police commissioner to justify having hundreds of cops there.

RP: According to the media, over 500 police were deployed.

JR: Whatever the exact number, the objective was, first, to retrospectively justify the huge police presence and second, to create an atmosphere in which they hoped protesters would be blamed for the violence. They operated just like ICE officers in the US.

If they'd wanted to arrest me, the officer could have just said, "Mate, you're under arrest, you assaulted me," which would have been a ridiculous claim, but I'd have had the option of arguing or going quietly. Instead, their modus operandi was maximum violence immediately.

You can see their methods in other footage where they attacked a man in a white shirt who is holding his hands up in the air and saying, "Hey, hey, hey." They punch him to the ground and keep punching him. This was their first resort, not their last.

RP: After they arrested you, you were held for five hours?

JR: Yes, and they put me in a cell for about five hours. I was pushed around by one of the young cops when I was taken into the station. There was a scuffle and he ripped my t-shirt. This was in front of the duty sergeant. He didn't admonish the officer because this is the usual operating procedure.

At no stage in the cell did they ask if I wanted water or offer to allow me to go to the bathroom. At no stage did they check my injuries, even though I was bleeding and left blood all over the bench in the cell.

No one came over to say, "Do you need help?" The only time

anyone approached was when a police medic came to the window and asked if I wanted an ambulance. I said, “I don’t want to talk to you through plexiglass, I want to talk to you as a human being.” He said, “Okay, so your answer is no,” and walked off.

After about four and a half hours a woman came, introduced herself as a detective, and said she wanted to talk to me about the incident. I said that was fine, but I wanted it recorded because I don’t trust the police. She pulled out a recorder, taped the interview, and I told her pretty much what I’ve just told you.

She said she would go and look at the body-cam footage. About twenty minutes later she returned and said, “Look, Mr Ricketson, you’re free to go.” It was incredible.

Then they kept me another 45 minutes, saying they had paperwork to do and that I’d need to sign for my possessions. They had taken everything from me when I was put in the cell.

Finally, a policeman—the same one who had pushed me around and ripped my t-shirt—came to the door, handed me my possessions and said, “You’re free to go.” No fingerprints, no photographs, no documents to sign, and if there weren’t audio-visual recordings of what happened at the police station, they could just deny I was ever there.

Normally they fingerprint you, take your photograph, bag your possessions, and you sign to say you’ve received everything back and that your money is intact. None of that happened.

My suspicion is that after I told the detective that I was a filmmaker and occasional journalist, she made some phone calls and someone said, “Just let him go.”

RP: We’ve just published an interview with a retired Irish man who was at his first demonstration. He was physically assaulted by police who threw him to the ground, broke his glasses and accused him of assault.

JR: Yes, that ties in. They’d obviously been given permission to do that. Someone has said, “Go for it, boys. Do your worst, inflict as much pain as possible.”

Even in the paddy wagon going back to the station, there was a young guy who’d been arrested and still had his hands tied behind his back. In the back of those vans there’s nothing to hold on to, so whenever you go around a corner you slide across the seat or onto the floor or into the person next to you.

I shouted to the officers, “Why don’t you take his handcuffs off? There’s no need for him to have handcuffs on in the back of the van.” All of this is designed to be as cruel as possible.

My jailing on bogus spying charges in Cambodia in 2017 was to intimidate and silence other journalists. The police violence in Sydney on Monday was intended to terrify people about going to future demonstrations. I was roughed up by the Cambodian police when I was arrested. They said I had to go to the police station for questioning and I refused. But that was nothing compared to what the police did to me in Sydney on Monday night.

My younger brother Robert, who has serious medical issues, had planned to come but wasn’t feeling well and didn’t go. If he had been treated like that he could easily have died. That’s how serious his illnesses are. They could have broken my hips when they slammed me into the road. Everyone knows the hips of 76-year-olds don’t heal easily. I’m thankful nobody died this time, but if they try this again, I suspect someone will.

RP: Minns and Albanese have doubled down in their defence of the police.

JR: Exactly but just look at the footage. How do you blame the

Muslim men who were praying? In what sense did they incite violence by praying in the street? Yet they were dragged away as if they were the problem.

RP: Minns and Albanese, who seized on the Bondi terrorist attack to impose a barrage of antidemocratic laws, have used the Herzog visit as a political provocation against the mass opposition expressed in large, ongoing and entirely peaceful anti-genocide protests.

JR: Yes, and very successful protests. The Harbour Bridge march with over 200,000 people made it very clear there is mass opposition in Australia to Israel’s genocide. Minns’ response was to try and ban it, but he couldn’t, and now, as we saw on Monday, he thinks he can control it with a bit of biffo.

Labor’s following the ICE playbook in the United States. My older brother, who’s been a Labor voter all his life, told me he’s never going to vote for Minns or Albanese at the next elections, and there are many like him.

Once all the available footage from Monday night is gathered and organised on a timeline, it will become obvious who actually caused the violence. I’m hoping someone is doing that.

RP: What do you think of Labor’s laws criminalising protests, slogans, etc.?

JR: They totally suck. I didn’t take my mobile phone to the demonstration because I thought there was a possibility I’d get arrested and the police would download everything on my phone. I was also aware there was a possibility of a \$5,000 fine, which I would refuse to pay. If you’re young, with a partner and a mortgage, that’s a strong disincentive to protest.

RP: And where do you think these laws are heading?

JR: I’m very worried about them, as everyone should be. There will be mission creep. You get one law in place, then you stretch it a bit more, and a bit more.

My sign on Monday night said, “I’m not antisemitic, I’m anti-genocide.” Even a sign like that could soon be construed as antisemitic. The thing to keep in mind is all this is about intimidation, to frighten people away from protest. The only answer is solidarity, organisation and a willingness not to be bullied into silence.

My concern is not what happened to me, but who gave the orders for the police to do this, and that there are serious consequences for all those responsible for the police violence. It’s just been announced that there’s going to be an official Law Enforcement Conduct Commission investigation. This will be a cover-up. There needs to be a completely independent investigation of what happened—nothing to do with the police, nothing to do with the government. Unless that occurs, it will happen again with even more dangerous consequences.



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