

Australia: Police confiscate anti-genocide placard at Ramadan festival in Lakemba

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Footage that has been shared widely on social media shows police officers confiscating a placard opposing the genocide in Gaza at the Ramadan night market in the southwestern Sydney suburb of Lakemba.

The confiscation of the placard was a particularly graphic display of a far-broader assault on democratic rights, being overseen by the New South Wales (NSW) Labor administration, in collaboration with its federal counterpart.

Behind endless claims of combatting “hate speech” and ensuring “social cohesion,” the Labor governments are carrying out a police-state crackdown on mass hostility to the genocide, with far broader implications for anti-war and other political opposition.

The Lakemba night market has been running for over a decade. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of people visit it, during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, to break fasts, sample foods, explore cultures and engage in discussion. Lakemba has the largest per capita Muslim population in the country and is where Australia’s largest mosque is located.

Under conditions where opposition to the Israeli war crimes is almost universal in Lakemba, and the broader southwest working class suburbs, the confiscation had the character of a provocation and a warning against any, however muted, expression of widespread anger.

The placard was apparently being carried around by two activists at the market on Sunday night. It featured an image of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with the word “Wanted.” That is entirely factual. Since November, 2024, Netanyahu has been evading an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the prosecution of the onslaught against Gaza.

The video shows police officers accosting the two activists. Responding to questions, the activists explained that they were using the placard to begin conversations

with people at the night market about the Gaza genocide and to conduct interviews of them.

The police officers repeatedly attempt to draw the activists away from a broader crowd. One of the officers says that “With the whole climate that’s been happening, it’s probably not the best thing.” Eventually, when confiscating the placard, an officer says that its content goes against the aim of the night market, which is to “bring people together.”

There is no indication in the video as to the legal power cited by the officers in confiscating the placard. That suggests the police simply stole the placard, harassed and menaced the activists without legal cause, all the while prattling on about “unity” and the “climate.”

The officers would only have done that if they had instructions from above. The night market is partially funded by NSW government grants. The state government of Premier Chris Minns has led the charge in vilifying pro-Palestinian activists as a threat to public order and in implementing a host of anti-protest measures directed against them.

The market is also in the seat of federal Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke. As a senior leader of the federal Labor government, Burke is directly involved in Australia’s ongoing support for the militarist Israeli regime, including through the export of weapons components. Burke’s Home Affairs portfolio oversees the Australian Federal Police and the domestic spy agency ASIO, institutions that have been central to the crackdown on opposition throughout the genocide.

Social media posts indicate that Burke visited the night market the day before the placard was stolen, along with leading state government minister Jihad Dib.

Whatever the precise chain of command in ordering the censorship, this is part of a broader pattern. A similar incident occurred earlier this month, when Australian Capital Territory Police declared a bar in Canberra to be a

“crime scene” and confiscated anti-fascist posters, depicting Trump, Netanyahu and other reactionary figures. The owner, having been threatened over entirely legitimate political speech, has since been told that no further action will be taken.

This is also not the first time an attempt has been made to suppress opposition to the genocide at the night market.

In 2024, a group of people chanted “Free Palestine” and “Free Gaza” at the night market. After footage of the chants was posted to social media, the virulently Zionist Australian Jewish Association orchestrated a series of complaints.

The Labor government’s “Multicultural NSW” agency, which part funds the market, extraordinarily reported those who had made the chants to the Engagement and Hate Crime Unit of NSW Police.

A week later, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners were blocked from handing out leaflets opposing the Gaza genocide by representatives of the Labor-controlled Bankstown-Canterbury Council. Only after the SEP exposed this blatant censorship did the council representatives desist from further attacks on its democratic rights.

The seizure of the placard points to the dangers posed by the NSW government’s announcement, several days after that censorship, that it is establishing a permanent NSW Police unit to target “hate-related threats” in Sydney.

NSW Labor Police and Counter-Terrorism Minister Yasmin Catley declared that the new unit, of approximately 250 officers, would “be out in our suburbs constantly roving around 24/7.” They would particularly target protests, she stated, along with places of worship and large public gatherings.

Most ominously, the new unit is under the Armed Response Command. Some of its officers will be equipped with high-powered rifles, which is unprecedented for regular police forces across Australia. That makes permanent the NSW Labor government’s decision to equip some officers with long-arms in the wake of the December 14 Bondi terrorist attack.

The new unit was announced only weeks after NSW Police went on a rampage against peaceful pro-Palestinian protesters earlier this month in Sydney. The demonstrators, opposing the red carpet welcome accorded to Israeli president and war criminal Isaac Herzog, were kettled, indiscriminately targeted with pepper spray and numbers were subjected to violent and unprovoked assaults by riot cops. It is legitimate to ask: had the new

unit been present, with its rifles, would they have opened fire on the crowd?

The police riot against the Sydney protest was overseen by the Labor government, which had activated multiple powers to ban a march opposing Herzog. One of those was rushed through by Labor in the wake of the Bondi attack, providing the NSW Police Commissioner with the authority to effectively prohibit public protests for up to three months in the wake of terrorism designation.

That power is subject to a court challenge by the Palestine Action Group and several other activist organisations. In initial hearings on Thursday David Hume SC, acting on behalf of the plaintiffs, likened the power to the “fox guarding the henhouse.” Hume noted that “The executive gets to decide whether there can be a protest against the executive.”

Hume stated that far from their purported aim of enhancing “social cohesion,” the laws “undermine the objectives of protecting the community and enhancing social cohesion.” They can be used to target protests “irrespective” of the purported dangers posed by those protests.

But of course “social cohesion” has never been the objective. That Orwellian term is being used by the Labor governments to describe any social and political opposition, in the first instance to the genocide, but more broadly to their program of militarism, austerity and authoritarianism.

That underscores the urgent need to build an independent political movement of the working class, directed against Labor and the entire capitalist political establishment, as the only means of defending basic democratic rights.



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