

Australia: Anti-genocide protesters arrested in Brisbane under “hate speech” laws

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18 March 2026

In an outright attack on basic democratic rights, police in the Australian state of Queensland last week arrested two participants in a Students for Palestine rally for saying or displaying the anti-genocide slogan “from the river to the sea.”

The arrests were deliberately made just hours after the right-wing Liberal National Party (LNP) state government passed legislation banning the phrase, together with another, “globalise the intifada,” becoming the first in Australia to explicitly do so.

One of those arrested, Liam Parry, was seized by police after addressing the rally at “Speakers Corner” outside the state parliament house to oppose the legislation. He was eventually released on bail but faces court on April 8 on charges that carry punishment of up to two years’ imprisonment.

After a march, a young demonstrator was later arrested in the city’s King George Square for wearing a singlet carrying the slogan. She was held by police for hours before being charged, but was then released with a police “caution” never to display the phrase again.

These arrests must be condemned and defeated. They set a wider precedent, including for the activation of parallel “hate speech” and “hate group” laws that have been introduced by Anthony Albanese’s federal Labor government and state Labor governments, falsely accusing opponents of the ongoing US-Israeli genocide in Palestine of “antisemitism.”

The Queensland legislation makes explicit the content of these laws, which are designed to intimidate and suppress the widespread hostility to the genocide, shown in large demonstrations, with broader implications for anti-war and other political opposition.

Showing its underlying agreement, Queensland’s state Labor Party opposition had backed the LNP

legislation. But it voted against the bill at the last minute, citing a lack of consultation over an abrupt switch to ban the two phrases, rather than give the state attorney-general a sweeping power to selectively prohibit political expressions.

This is not just a Queensland or LNP question. Behind endless claims of combatting “hate speech” and ensuring “social cohesion,” the federal and state Labor governments have been conducting a police-state crackdown on dissent. That was graphically displayed in the New South Wales Labor government’s banning of marches in Sydney and the unleashing of police violence on protests against last month’s visit by Israeli President Isaac Herzog at the invitation of the Albanese government.

Under the Queensland legislation, anyone who publicly recites, distributes, publishes or displays either of the prohibited expressions—which both oppose Israeli oppression in Palestine—can be jailed for up to two years.

The legislation also grants police extraordinary powers to stop, detain and search people and vehicles without a warrant if an officer “reasonably suspects” that a person possesses material conveying “prescribed expressions” or has committed or is committing any related offence.

The Albanese government’s recent “hate group” laws go further. They allow a minister to “prohibit” political groups or parties, simply on the basis of being “satisfied” that they support vaguely-defined “hate crimes” or even “may do so” in the future. This means organisations can be banned solely for what ideas or political views they are alleged to uphold. That amounts to a thought crime. Once a party or group is outlawed, anyone convicted of being a member or supporter faces up to 15 years’ imprisonment.

This is an historic attack on free speech and political association, not attempted since the 1951 referendum defeat of the Menzies government's legislation to outlaw "communism."

By conflating anti-genocide statements with antisemitic hatred, all such legislation seeks to criminalise opposition to the ongoing mass killing of Palestinians by the US-backed Israeli regime and the Labor government's complicity in these crimes. This now extends to Labor's involvement in the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran and Lebanon.

The Albanese government's participation in this war, including by sending missiles, a war command plane and military personnel to the Persian Gulf, will lead to more measures to suppress opposition.

Pseudo-left groups have responded to the Brisbane arrests by attributing the threat to free speech solely to the LNP state government, thus covering up the role of the Labor governments. Socialist Alliance, via its publication *Green Left Weekly*, depicted the arrests as "total overreach" by the police.

Likewise, *Red Flag*, the newspaper of Socialist Alternative, said the arrests "mark the beginning of a new, dark period in Queensland politics" that showed "how committed this LNP government is" to undermining freedom of expression. After a brief reference to the war on Iran, the article concluded: "If the LNP and Queensland police think that they can stop us from protesting against such crimes, they are wrong."

Not only does this framing cover up the assault on freedom of speech, assembly and political association by the Labor governments, it continues the line that these groups have peddled throughout the genocide: that opposition must be confined to protests aimed at trying to pressure governments to change course.

The anti-protest and hate speech measures are not just responses to demonstrations. They are part of a drive by the ruling class, spearheaded by Labor, to stifle opposition and prepare the population for war. The Albanese government is already directly participating in the criminal aggression against Iran—supplying military support, as well as targeting intelligence via the US satellite and submarine communication bases at Pine Gap and North West Cape.

The demand must be raised for the charges against Parry to be dropped, and for the overturning of the

Queensland bans and all the "hate speech" laws imposed in different states and federally. Parry's arrest is a test case: if governments can imprison those who voice slogans against genocide, they will move to criminalise anti-war dissent more broadly.

The bipartisan character of the assault on fundamental democratic rights underscores the political reality: The fight against the genocide and US militarism requires the mobilisation of the strength of the working class against all the capitalist parties. This struggle must be based on a socialist perspective directed against the source of the descent into barbarism, dictatorial forms of rule and war—the capitalist system itself.



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