

Mass arrests in Brisbane add to repression of anti-genocide protests in Australia

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Large squads of riot police arrested 22 anti-genocide demonstrators in Brisbane last weekend, taking to more than 50 the number of pro-Palestinian protesters violently arrested in three Australian states in recent weeks.

The Brisbane arrests, conducted over Saturday and Sunday at two rallies, marked a show of force by the Queensland state Premier David Crisafulli's right-wing Liberal National Party (LNP) government to enforce its recently enacted "hate speech" legislation, which bans the anti-genocide phrases "from the river to the sea" and "globalise the intifada."

At the first demonstration on Saturday by about 300 people against the laws, Queensland's heavily-armed Public Safety Response Team (PSRT)—which specialises in "incidents of critical level violence or public disorder and civil disobedience"—arrested 20 people on 14 charges of displaying prohibited expressions and 7 charges of reciting prohibited expressions.

Dozens of PSRT commandos, backed by horses, arrested speakers at the rally and charged into the crowd to grab people who were chanting or displaying the banned "river to the sea" slogan.

After 15 people were arrested at the event, another five were arrested following a march to the police lockup. Two more arrests were made by large PSRT contingents at a Justice for Palestine (JFP) anti-genocide rally of about 700 people the following day.

Over the past two weeks, police have also arrested three other people for reciting or displaying a prohibited slogan.

These moves followed police operations in recent weeks conducted by the state Labor governments in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, involving dawn raids on homes across Sydney and Melbourne.

The Sydney raids targeted people who had been subjected to vicious police attacks on demonstrators at Sydney Town Hall on February 9 who protested against the visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog, an accused genocide inciter who was invited to Australia by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government.

In Melbourne, riot police in full combat gear conducted early morning raids to detain eight women who had taken part in a March 6 anti-genocide protest against the Albanese government outside the Victorian Trades Hall building, a crackdown initiated by Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Luke Hilakari.

Like those in Sydney and Melbourne, the Brisbane arrests are designed to try to intimidate protests against the continuing US-Israeli genocide in Gaza under conditions in which the mass killings have been extended to Iran and Lebanon, all with the material, political and diplomatic support of the Albanese government.

All these arrests must be condemned and defeated. They are based on the utterly false allegation, spearheaded by the Labor governments, that opponents of the genocide in Palestine, which include many Jews, are antisemitic.

Lengthy imprisonment is possible. In Queensland, those convicted face up to two years in jail, while those charged in Sydney and Melbourne on trumped-up allegations, such as assaulting police or damaging property, could be jailed for similar terms, and anyone tried under the Albanese government's "hate group" legislation to outlaw designated political organisations could face up to 15 years.

The Brisbane arrests had a stage-managed character to them. Opening Saturday's protest, JFP organiser Phil Monsour foreshadowed the arrests, stating: "A message to the Crisafulli government... we will use violence against us to grow our movement." He said the JFP had a "strategy" to double its social media following.

Over the next two hours, this "strategy" became evident. Speakers concluded their comments with a chant of the prohibited phrase "from the river to the sea" and were escorted by PSRT squads into waiting police vehicles.

At the event's conclusion—after the 15 arrests—Monsour declared that the "JFP determines when and where people get arrested," and that "the police did exactly what we wanted."

That is, the aim of the organisers was to use arrests to place pressure on the Queensland LNP government. This

served to channel the protest against the LNP government, while barely mentioning the federal and state Labor governments.

Nor was there any reference to the Albanese government's support for the US-Israeli war on Iran, or its wider commitment to the underlying drive by US imperialism for control over the resource-rich and strategic Middle East as part of preparations for war against China.

There was no mention of US President Donald Trump's threats to exterminate an entire civilisation in Iran, or the Albanese government's dispatch of SAS troops, a war command aircraft, missiles and other military assistance to the Gulf region to bolster the assault on Iran.

This line of deflecting attention from Labor's role was made explicit by the featured speaker when Sunday's rally concluded at the Queensland state parliament building. Greens federal deputy leader Senator Mehreen Faruqi—whose party has sought closer relations with the Albanese government—said: “Your state, Queensland, is at the spear tip of this fight for civil liberties.”

Faruqi also played down the significance of the anti-protest and hate speech laws, describing them as “bad, appalling, reckless, but also absurd and stupid.” In reality, these laws are deliberate and far-reaching attacks on free speech, freedom of assembly and other basic democratic rights.

The diversion from Labor's leading part in the protest crackdown was echoed by an April 19 article on the Brisbane arrests in *Red Flag*, the outlet of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative. It made no mention of the arrests in Sydney and Melbourne, the Albanese government's support for the genocide or the Iran war. It presented the fight against the arrests as a conflict solely with the LNP government.

Among the few mentions by the rally speakers in Brisbane on the weekend of the Labor governments was to cite last week's NSW Court of Appeal ruling striking down as unconstitutional that state Labor government's sweeping legislation to give the police the power to ban all protests for months at a time. That verdict left intact other powers to ban or shut down demonstrations, such as Labor's declaration of Herzog's visit as being covered by its Major Events Act.

Speakers heralded the court judgment as a victory, and proof of the legal fragility of the LNP's laws, despite NSW Premier Chris Minns continuing to defend the unconstitutional legislation, as well as the wave of arrests from the February 9 anti-Herzog demonstration. Minns' defiance underscored the readiness of Labor governments to override legal and democratic rights.

The JFP has said it will mount a similar constitutional challenge to the Queensland laws, on the ground that they

also infringe the implied freedom of political communication in the 1901 Australian Constitution, while also arguing that use of the “river to the sea” phrase as political expression is not prohibited by the LNP legislation.

As the limited character of last Thursday's NSW Court of Appeal ruling demonstrates, democratic rights cannot be defended exclusively through the courts, whose function, alongside the police, is to defend, enforce and seek to legitimise the capitalist economic and legal order overall.

The demand must be raised throughout the working class for the dropping of all the charges and the overturning of all the anti-protest and “hate speech” laws, including those of the Labor governments that have led the charge against anti-genocide protests since the US-backed Israeli assault began in October 2023.

The Albanese government's 2026 National Defence Strategy, released last week, is another statement of the Albanese government's total commitment to US-led wars globally, and above all to Washington's preparations for a catastrophic war against China, of which the drive for US control over the entire Middle East is a critical part.

Defence Minister Richard Marles pledged to increase military spending by \$53 billion over the coming decade, on top of record expenditure of \$60 billion this financial year. That means further cutting social spending—from health and education to disability services—to pay the colossal bill, at the expense of working-class households.

As the WSWS has stated: “The only way to defeat the attacks on fundamental democratic rights and stop the plunge into wider wars is through the mobilisation of the power of the working class against all those responsible, including the Labor governments. This fight requires the development of an independent working-class movement—in workplaces, throughout industries and across national borders—against the capitalist system that is the root cause of war and repression.”



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