

Western Australian Labor government mounts huge police operation to block protests outside weapons expo

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The Labor government in Western Australia (WA) mobilised what Police Minister Reece Whitby described as the “biggest police operation” in the state’s history to prevent demonstrations at Australia’s largest military weapons exhibition in Perth, the state capital, yesterday.

An estimated 600 people marched to a rally outside the large exclusion zone that the government declared around the Perth Convention Centre, in the heart of the city, to shield the display of high-tech weaponry. Nearly 2,000 officers were reportedly mobilised for the three-day Land Forces event.

The Labor government imposed police-state powers under the Land Forces (Special Powers) Act, passed by the WA parliament last month, including to ban targeted people from the entire area.

That legislation enabled police to set up checkpoints, cordons and roadblocks to block entry, and stop and search people and vehicles. Police can seize items, force people to provide ID and remove any headgear, and issue directions, including move-on orders.

Criminal offences range from “fail to comply with a direction” or “behave in a threatening manner,” such as to use offensive language, to be punished by imprisonment for one year and a fine of \$12,000, to attempt to enter an exclusion zone after being banned, with imprisonment for three years and a fine of \$36,000.

The police commissioner was given the power to declare wider exclusion zones on the spot. Such declarations cannot be challenged in any court or other legal proceedings. Police are also protected from liability for any wrongdoing, even if it causes injury.

The Land Forces International Land Defence Exposition is held every two years. The selection of Perth to host the gathering for the first time is part of Australia’s transformation by the federal and state Labor governments into a crucial platform, on behalf of Australian imperialism, for a US-led war against China.

That transformation includes the expansion of the HMAS Stirling naval base, about 50 kilometres south of the centre of Perth, to host US nuclear attack submarines from next year, and the construction of the Henderson Defence Precinct, a major naval shipbuilding hub about 20 kilometres south of Perth’s centre.

In August, the US Navy said the number of US military personnel, civilian contractors and their families in Perth would swell to 2,300 by 2030, many more than previously indicated. That would make Perth the largest site in Australia for the AUKUS (US, UK and Australia) operations against China, apart from the strategic northern city of Darwin.

WA Premier Roger Cook boasted that this year’s expo is the biggest yet, bringing together nearly 15,000 participants, including government and military leaders from around the world, and almost 1,000 exhibiting companies. Cook said it features a “massive lineup” of companies and organisations, with exhibitors from 60 countries.

The companies displaying their latest weapons systems, such as AI-guided attack drones, include Lockheed Martin, Elbit Systems, BAE Systems, Honeywell, Boeing, Babcock, Northrop Grumman and Thales. These companies are heavily involved in what is an unfolding world war—the wars underway in the Middle East and against Russia, alongside the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the preparations for war against China.

Notably, Elbit Systems is Israel’s largest weapons manufacturer, supplying drones and surveillance technology used to kill Palestinians. Lockheed Martin supplies the F-35 jets that have been used to bomb and devastate Gaza.

The expo, which is closed to the public, is funded by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as well as the state Labor government. Yet the scale of their financial contributions has been kept secret, under the veil of commercial in-confidence deals with the exhibitors.

Cook has promoted Labor's vision of creating a war-related economy, with military weapons-making and exporting to become the second largest industry in WA after mining. In May, he told an Indian Ocean Defence and Security Conference about plans to establish a missile manufacturing hub, possibly in the coal mining town of Collie, 200 kilometres south of Perth.

While in Perth, delegates from across the Indo-Pacific, Europe, Asia and North America will tour the Henderson project, as well as the Australian Automation and Robotics Precinct in Neerabup, about 30 kilometres to the north of Perth's centre.

Cook has emphasised Perth's strategic location on the Indian Ocean, providing a base for operations across the Indo-Pacific region. On Sunday he sought to justify this potentially disastrous commitment, saying: "We can't overlook the fact or hide our heads in the sand that we live in a geopolitically, very important and strategic area."

Cook linked the expo to his government's "investment in training a skilled defence and shipbuilding workforce," saying this was "creating jobs for the future." In reality, this is about channeling workers and young people into the war machine, regardless of the danger of triggering a full-scale war with China.

The state government reportedly plans for about 500 school students to visit the exhibition. In August, Labor expanded its Career Taster Program into the military sector. Targeting Year 9 students across WA, this program arranges "industry visits, virtual work experience and mentorship" in science and technology fields. Last year, the program involved over 50 percent of the Year 9 cohort, or about 18,375 students, plus more than 8,100 students from other years.

This is in addition to the Schools Pathways Program, a joint initiative with the federal and South Australian state Labor government to direct students into AUKUS-related industries, and the Year 11 Defence Industry Pathways Program, a school-based traineeship connected with military industry employers.

This is part of the Albanese government's plan to put Australia in the top ten of weapons exporting countries in the world, amid a rush by the capitalist governments in the US, Europe and Japan to remilitarise on a scale not seen since World War II.

Two years ago, the Victorian state Labor government unleashed a violent police attack on demonstrators against the last Land Forces Expo in Melbourne. Some 1,800 police were mobilised for the event, almost outnumbering protesters. The Public Order Response Team used stun grenades, shot rubber bullets and fired tear gas against people. After 89 people were arrested at the scene, a further

21 people were arrested following police use of CCTV and bodycam footage.

Labor's Melbourne police operation was a clear provocation intended to create an atmosphere in which the protesters could be labelled as violent. Labor leaders, including Albanese, blamed the protesters for the police attacks.

Since then, the Albanese government has only intensified the integration into US war operations. After a meeting between US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles in Washington last month, the Pentagon announced that it would "accelerate force posture initiatives at Australian bases"—that is, expand the stationing of troops and military assets.

Last month, the *Guardian* published a report showing that the US government already controls more than 17 defence facilities in Australia and has access to another 75 Australian installations. In addition to forward-deployment bases in the north and west of the continent, and spying and targeting centres at Pine Gap in central Australia and the North West Cape, this includes HMAS Stirling and other facilities close to major population centres, like Perth.

In addition to being complicit in Israel's war crimes, the Albanese government has sent weaponry and military personnel to join the illegal US-Israeli war against Iran, and is actively supporting the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. As underscored by the events in Perth, it is at the centre of the preparations to open up another front in this developing global war—a potential nuclear conflict with China.

Workers and young people must defend the right to protest, and all the other fundamental democratic rights that the federal and state Labor governments are tearing up.

But Labor's record and trajectory underscores the necessity for an opposed political perspective that is not based on futilely seeking to pressure Labor governments into changing course. What is needed is the mobilisation of the working class against these governments, the entire political establishment and the capitalist system that is the source of the plunge into another world war.



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