

Large police mobilisation at right-wing Reclaim Australia rallies

By James Cogan
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Large numbers of police were mobilised over the weekend to protect small rallies by the right-wing, anti-Islamic “Reclaim Australia” movement from counter-protests organised by various pseudo-left organisations, anti-racist groups and self-styled anarchists. The police took advantage of the stand-offs to test out anti-riot deployments and crowd-control techniques.

In Melbourne on Saturday, as many as 500 police, including the specialised riot squad and a mounted contingent, were on hand to stand between approximately 50 right-wing demonstrators who assembled at the Victorian state parliament and a counter-protest of some 2,000. Police drenched the anti-racists in pepper spray when they sought to block a group of 60 people associated with the fascist United Patriotic Front (UPF) from joining the rally about an hour after it had started.

The Melbourne Street Medics group has alleged that police pepper-sprayed first aid workers who were seeking to treat people who had been doused and were suffering respiratory distress. Four people were reportedly arrested for various offenses.

Police were present at racist rallies in 17 other cities and regional centres on Saturday and Sunday. In Sydney, police shielded a right-wing protest of about 150 people in the city’s Martin Place from several thousand counter-protestors. Five arrests were made. In major cities such as Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, Hobart and the national capital Canberra, the Reclaim Australia rallies were attended by no more than a few hundred people and generally well-outnumbered by opponents.

Approximately 200 rallied in the north Queensland town of Rockhampton to hear Pauline Hanson, head of the racist One Nation party. In the Queensland town of

Mackay, a few hundred gathered to listen to a diatribe against Islam delivered by George Christensen, a Liberal National Party member of the federal parliament and the government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

While Christensen was the only member of the parliamentary establishment to openly associate with the Reclaim Australia rallies, the political views expressed at them dovetail entirely with the political climate of anti-Muslim demonisation encouraged by the Liberal-National government and the Labor Party opposition.

A concerted effort is being made by the Abbott government to use manufactured claims that Australia is threatened by domestic Islamist radicals to divert from growing social tensions over falling living standards and widening social inequality. It has been assisted by the establishment media, which has given blanket coverage to incidents that have been portrayed as evidence of the “terrorist” danger.

These include the largest ever “anti-terror” police raids in Sydney and Melbourne last September, the police killing of 18-year-old Numan Haider in Melbourne shortly after, the taking of hostages at Sydney’s Lindt café by mentally ill Man Haron Monis last December and further raids and the arrest of two men in February for allegedly plotting a terrorist attack.

In each case, the evidence of Islamic State-inspired conspiracies has been highly dubious. The Labor Party, however, has stepped forward to give its full support to the anti-terror hysteria and the draconian legislation that the Abbott government has rushed through parliament on the pretext of combatting terrorism.

Reclaim Australia began organising in this political climate and called its first anti-Islamic demonstrations in April. The small right-wing formations that are

active in the rallies combine xenophobic attacks on Muslims with populist demagoguery against immigrants, homophobia and anti-communism. Their language about protecting “the Australian way of life” echoes Tony Abbott, who has repeatedly justified his government’s attacks on civil liberties on the grounds that “home grown” Islamic extremism threatens “our way of life.”

The most striking aspect of Reclaim Australia’s emergence is the amount of attention its activities and small rallies have received from the political establishment, the mass media and the pseudo-left milieu. A fringe of extreme racists and nationalists has been systematically promoted in order to divide the working class, set different sections against one another and cut across the development of a political struggle against social inequality and the dangers of war.

Christensen’s appearance at the Mackay rally makes clear that the positions of Reclaim Australia are viewed with considerable sympathy in the ranks of the government. At the very least, the immense publicity is given to their racist rhetoric is a welcome diversion, for both Liberal and Labor, from any public discussion on the deteriorating economic conditions, corporate demands for stepped-up budget austerity and Australia’s alignment with the US in preparations for war with China in the Asia-Pacific.

The pseudo-left groupings that play a major part in the counter-protests, such as Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and the Socialist Party, have seized upon the Reclaim Australia rallies to achieve the same fundamental aim. The call for “unity” against racism has become the means to advance their agenda of assembling a new self-styled “left-wing” political alliance that can work to prevent any break by the working class with the thoroughly discredited Labor Party and trade union apparatuses.

The anti-racist demonstrations have little or nothing to say about the role of the Labor Party in the encouraging the atmosphere of anti-terror hysteria that has emboldened Reclaim Australia to take to the streets. If anything, Labor’s hypocritical criticisms of the right-wing protests, in contrast to Abbott’s refusal to ban Christensen from speaking at one, will be used in the pseudo-left milieu to try and breathe life into assertions that Labor is the “lesser evil” of the major capitalist parties.

The preoccupation of the pseudo-left with the issues of race and racism is the flip side of the efforts of the Reclaim Australia groupings to channel social tensions into nationalism and xenophobia. It diverts from the urgent task of developing the unity and political independence of the working class through a break with the Labor and union apparatuses and a direct struggle against the root cause of the social crisis, the capitalist profit system on a world scale.

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