

As court bans racist rally, Australian media promotes far-right

By Richard Phillips
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The New South Wales (NSW) Supreme Court and the Australian Federal Court yesterday banned a “10-year memorial” rally to be held in Cronulla today by the anti-Muslim Party for Freedom. The planned rally was supported by various other small extreme right-wing groups, including Reclaim Australia, Rise Up Australia and the neo-Nazi Great Aussie Patriot group.

The Supreme Court outlawed the demonstration under section 25 of the state’s Summary Offences Act on an application by NSW police. A separate Federal Court hearing granted a joint application by the Sutherland Shire Council and Muslim community leader Jamal Rifi to stop the rally. Rifi and the local council are also taking legal action against the Party for Freedom and its leader Nick Folkes for violating the Racial Discrimination Act. That case will be heard in the Federal Court on February 5.

Today’s event was to be held on the 10th anniversary of riots on 11 December 2005 in the southern Sydney beachside suburb. On that day, several thousand people, whipped up by right-wing media commentators and groups, gathered in Cronulla. The mob—some draped in Australian flags and under the influence of alcohol—chanted nationalist and racist slogans and physically assaulted individuals of Middle Eastern appearance.

Several people were bashed or pelted with beer bottles, and chased into nearby shops and hotels. Twenty-six people were injured and over 51 arrested and variously charged with malicious damage, affray, offensive conduct and resisting arrest (see: “Government and media provocations spark racist violence on Sydney beaches”).

The Party for Freedom advertised today’s banned rally as a “day of remembrance” for those it falsely

claims suffered verbal and physical abuse and intimidation by “Muslim gang members.” The organisation opposes Muslim immigration, which it claims is “genocide” against Australians. It accuses the federal government and the Labor opposition of “treason” and supporting sharia law.

At yesterday’s Federal Court hearing, Folkes was directed to give a sworn undertaking that he would not host or address any rally in Cronulla this weekend. If he violated this agreement he would be “liable to imprisonment, sequestration of property or punishment for contempt.”

Individuals associated with the Party for Freedom but not mentioned in yesterday’s court order have vowed to hold a “non-halal” BBQ today at the previously planned rally location in Cronulla. Folkes has said that he will participate and his Facebook account has a slaughtered pig that will be taken to this anti-Muslim provocation.

While Islamic leaders and the local council hailed yesterday’s bans on the demonstration, the ruling is an attack on freedom of assembly and sets a dangerous anti-democratic precedent. Like every other measure initially directed against right-wing extremists, it will inevitably be used far more ruthlessly against the working class in the future. Maintaining “public order” will be the pretext for banning future protests and rallies against worsening social conditions and the drive to war.

While the rally has been banned, the media and political establishment has consciously cultivated fascistic groups such as those sponsoring the Cronulla rally.

In 2005, the media outlets principally involved in promoting the extreme-right consisted of Murdoch-owned tabloids and 2GB radio announcer

Alan Jones, a former Liberal Party speechwriter and close friend of then Prime Minister John Howard. In the week before the riot, Jones whipped up a lynch-mob atmosphere with on-air readings of racist diatribes urging people to mobilise in Cronulla to “reclaim our beaches,” “support Leb and Wog bashing day” and defend the “Australian way of life.”

A decade on, the latest anti-Islam provocation in Cronulla has been given political oxygen not just by the radio shock-jocks but by every section of the media—radio, television and print. From Murdoch’s tabloids to erstwhile “liberal” outlets like Fairfax Media and the state-funded ABC and SBS networks, the so-called mainstream media has provided what amounts to a daily stream of free publicity for the Party for Freedom and other ultra-right groups.

Constant news coverage by the ABC and SBS and double-page features by the Fairfax Media have given the Party for Freedom unparalleled exposure. The group’s web site, its \$50 anti-Muslim t-shirts and other foul racist paraphernalia, and the fact that it is seeking official electoral registration, have been spread to every part of Australia.

In their own way the media has been engaged in a virtual celebration of the Cronulla riots, lending legitimacy to the extreme right-wing groups. So-called liberal publications, while feigning concern about the Cronulla riots, have used the occasion to re-quote fascist calls for violence made against Middle Eastern immigrants on that occasion.

Fairfax Media has tracked down some of the thugs involved in the 2005 attacks on Muslims and given them space to voice their divisive and reactionary views. The ABC radio’s Triple J, which is oriented toward youth, has widely commented on the Cronulla anniversary event, including a friendly interview with Folkes, describing him as “ordinary” and “non-threatening, almost ingratiating.”

Pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative and various anarchist groups play a key role in keeping such right-wing outfits in the media spotlight. Their “anti-fascist” demagoguery and calls for physical confrontation obscure the reasons for the emergence and promotion of extreme nationalist elements.

The xenophobic ranting of figures like Folkes is just the extension of the propaganda used to justify the

reactionary “war on terror” that has been waged by the US and its allies, with Australia in the forefront, since 2001. The entire political establishment has contributed, in one way or another, to whipping up a climate of fear against Muslims to justify the wars in the Middle East and police-state measures at home.

The pseudo-left organisations not only support the latest imperialist war in Syria and Iraq, but on the home front promote Labor and the Greens as the “lesser evil” as compared to the Coalition. In doing so, the pseudo-lefts block the development of a genuinely progressive alternative to the agenda of war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights that has been implemented by successive governments—Labor and Coalition.

In keeping with the reactionary traditions of “White Australia” racism, Folkes and his ilk seek to make an appeal to the widespread alienation produced by the worsening social crisis. Not accidentally, his Party for Freedom not only scapegoats Muslims but has also been in the forefront of blaming Chinese immigrants for rising housing prices in Australian cities. Its anti-Chinese campaign in May received widespread coverage in the establishment press.

The media promotion of these right-wing extremists is aimed at dividing workers along racial and religious lines, and above all at preventing the development of an independent movement of the working class that fights for a socialist solution to the current social disaster and war.

The author also recommends :

Australian PM unveils plan for indefinite detention of “terrorists”
[12 December 2015]

Australian state-funded networks provide platform for extreme-right
[24 November 2015]

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