

Australian governments try to block demonstrations against police violence

By Oscar Grenfell
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State and federal governments across Australia launched a hysterical campaign against protests being held today in solidarity with the mass demonstrations opposing police violence in the US, cynically claiming they pose an unacceptable risk to public health.

Tens of thousands of workers and young people indicated they would demonstrate, despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison, along with state premiers, demanding that they stay away. Senior government officials slandered protesters as “insane.”

The New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal government moved in the Supreme Court yesterday for the Sydney rally to be banned, allowing mass arrests, but the ban was overturned by an appeal court today at the last minute. The Victorian state Labor government’s police threatened to fine participants and organisers of the Melbourne demonstration.

These are outright attacks on the right to protest, a basic democratic right, that are aimed at establishing a precedent for the suppression of mounting social and political opposition.

This underscores the necessity for workers, students and young people to oppose the bans and police threats. Any participants who are arrested or victimised must be defended by the entire working class.

The official rationale for the attempt to block the rallies—that they threaten transmission of COVID-19—is a lie. For the past month, the same governments seeking to ban demonstrations have proclaimed the necessity of “reopening” the economy.

They have recklessly overturned lockdown measures at breakneck speed, forcing workers back into workplaces and herding thousands of teachers and students into schools in the face of substantial opposition. Governments have admitted that this back-to-work drive will result in increased infections,

but are intent on a full resumption of corporate profit-making.

Now, amid major global protests against police violence and fears in ruling circles of widespread discontent, these governments have “rediscovered” the dangers posed by the pandemic.

The Australian ruling elite is well aware that the underlying causes of the explosive protests in the US are mass hostility to social inequality, authoritarianism and the dominance over society of a tiny corporate and financial elite. This growing divide is present in Australia, no less than internationally, and governments are responding with police-state measures, like their counterparts globally.

The attack on the protests has been coordinated at the highest levels of the political establishment and the state.

Yesterday morning, Morrison held a discussion with NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews about preventing the rallies in the country’s two most populous states.

Morrison previously expressed nervousness about the US protests, declaring on Tuesday they should not be “imported.”

His assertion that the situation in Australia is different to the US was immediately refuted by a brutal police assault against a 16-year-old Aboriginal boy in Sydney later that day. A protest in Sydney called at short notice was attended by over 1,000 people, following a large demonstration in Perth, Western Australia.

Morrison and the state premiers clearly fear that this weekend’s protests would attract mass support and could become the catalyst for a broader political movement. Echoing the prime minister, Andrews said it would be “irresponsible” to participate in the

Melbourne protest and declared: “Victoria Police will not hesitate to maintain order.” Senior police officers said they would issue thousands of dollars in fines if more than 20 people took part, the number to which outside gatherings are currently restricted in that state.

Berejiklian then announced that NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller, acting under her government’s direction, would seek an urgent Supreme Court injunction to ban the Sydney protest. While she cited concerns over public health, Police Minister David Elliot blurted out the real reason, describing the protest as “not my kind of cause.”

Significantly, Fuller’s application said the protest should be outlawed because it risked “inciting violence and other forms of unlawfulness.” It referenced the mass demonstrations in the US and warned of the current public “mood.”

The court, wary of too nakedly suppressing democratic rights, rejected these grounds. Instead it banned the protest on the public health pretext. The court cited the latest NSW health order, which supposedly limits outdoor gatherings to ten people. In reality, this is not enforced anywhere.

In addition, the NSW government has permitted Returned and Services League clubs to have up to 500 patrons on their premises at any time. Yesterday it announced that corporate boxes would be reopened at Rugby League grounds, with up to 50 spectators in each room.

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The protest organisers, moreover, appeared to have taken substantial precautions, purchasing thousands of masks and hand sanitiser and appointing 50 marshals to monitor social distancing.

The Supreme Court invoked NSW laws stipulating that police be notified of a protest seven days before it is to take place. Organisers had fulfilled this anti-democratic requirement. In discussion with the police, they subsequently changed the notice last week, moving the rally to Sydney Town Hall. Police filled out the form, clearly implying consent.

Despite this, the court ruled that sufficient notice had not been provided. Police stated that they could arrest anyone in a group of more than ten people. Police commissioner Fuller said that if 500 people attended the protest, this would trigger police action, including move-on-orders, fines and arrests.

Only at the last-minute, after thousands of people had already gathered, did the Court of Appeal overturn the Supreme Court ruling.

The anti-democratic moves further demonstrate that the build up of police powers is directed against social and political opposition from the working class. It exposes the false character of claims, including by the protest organisers, that police repression is solely a racial issue involving the targeting of African-Americans in the US and Aboriginal people in Australia.

In fact, the police serve a class role, defending the capitalist system and unprecedented social inequality, and cracking down on dissent. Workers and youth of all backgrounds have been subjected to police violence and murder.

This demonstrates that the fight against police violence, including appalling and disproportionate deaths of Aboriginal people in police custody, is inseparable from a struggle against capitalism. The entire working class must be united in the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies. These would include abolishing the police and the military, placing the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and establishing a society based on social equality.

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