

Defying government threats, thousands join Australian protests against police violence

By Oscar Grenfell
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More than 100,000 people participated in rallies in cities and towns throughout Australia over the weekend, called in solidarity with the massive US demonstrations triggered by the murder of George Floyd and in opposition to Australian police violence and killings.

The protesters defied a hysterical campaign by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, and the corporate media, demanding that they stay at home on the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic. The Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews threatened large fines against organisers. The Liberal-National government of New South Wales (NSW) had the Sydney protest declared illegal by the courts.

This intimidation, however, did nothing to reduce participation. Around 40,000 took part in Sydney, gathering even before a higher court overturned the ban. There were similar numbers in Melbourne, despite Andrews' threats. Some 30,000 people turned out in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland and more than 20,000 rallied in Adelaide, South Australia. Hundreds protested in Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory.

Dozens of rallies and vigils were held in regional and rural centres. More than 2,000 attended a protest in Newcastle, a working-class city north of Sydney. Over 1,000 marched in Townsville, in northern Queensland. Events were held in Ballarat, Dubbo, Byron Bay, Lismore and many smaller towns.

The substantial attendance demonstrated why the political elites reacted with such nervousness and hostility to the rallies. They clearly feared that the protests could become the catalyst for a mass movement, amid broad social and political opposition.

The demonstrations exposed the fraudulent character of claims by senior politicians, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison, that there was no need for the global rallies to be "imported," supposedly because the situation

in Australia is fundamentally different to that in the United States.

Protesters rejected these assertions, drawing particular attention to the 432 Aboriginal people who have been killed in police custody or prisons since 1991. Speakers at the rallies included relatives of victims of police violence and murder.

In Sydney, the parents of a 16-year-old Aboriginal boy who was assaulted by police officers last week spoke, extending their solidarity to Floyd's family and pointing to the international character of the fight against police violence.

The family of David Dungay Jr, a 26-year-old Aboriginal man who was smothered to death by correctional officers at Long Bay jail in 2015, took part in the Sydney rally. They had previously noted the parallels between the killings of Dungay and Floyd. The last words of both men were: "I can't breathe."

Dungay's mother Leetona Dungay had declared on Friday that she would defy the attempt to ban the Sydney protest, stating: "The correctional services officers ... put my son in the ground and I'm going to walk on it for my march."

The Sydney and Melbourne protests were joined by broad cross-sections of workers, retirees and young people. Large groups of high school and university students participated, along with working-class youth of Aboriginal and African descent who spoke out against their harassment by the police.

As in every country, the protests were marked by their multi-racial character, with workers and youth of every background uniting in a common struggle.

Pointing to the spontaneous character of the demonstrations, inspired by the mass rallies in the US and globally, there were no visible contingents from any of the official political parties or the trade unions at the Sydney protest.

This is no accident. The Greens, which posture as opponents of police violence, collaborate closely with the Labor Party, which explicitly opposed the protests. The unions are hostile to any movement from below. They operate as an industrial police force, seeking to prevent working-class social and political struggles as they collaborate with governments and the corporations in a continuous offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions.

Speaking to Socialist Equality Party campaigners, protesters pointed to the broader sentiments animating the demonstrations.

A TAFE student from a working-class suburb in western Sydney said the main problem in society was “the elites, the billionaires, the people who are in control and just want money.” He said police violence was aimed at defending social inequality.

An Aboriginal woman said she was participating because she believed in “equality,” adding: “It’s a great show of people power and it’s a great show of how the world should move forward. The working class is here.”

A young Aboriginal worker also pointed to the centrality of class, declaring: “It’s really the class that matches us all. I think I would find myself, as an indigenous man, understanding more the struggles of a poor whitefella than a black billionaire” (see: Australian protesters speak out: “The class systems need to be abolished”).

The protests underscored the fact that police repression is directed, above all, against the emerging struggles of the working class.

On Friday, the NSW Supreme Court upheld an application by the state government and police to ban the Sydney protest, invoking draconian anti-protest laws. The injunction also cynically invoked the dangers of COVID-19 transmission posed by mass gatherings, even though governments are rapidly overturning safety restrictions in line with the demands of big business.

An appeal court reversed the ban only 12 minutes before the rally was due to begin and with thousands already in attendance. Its decision has not yet been published. Legal experts said the court likely determined that the police had consented to the rally by accepting notices of intention submitted by the organisers.

Sections of the political establishment clearly feared that mass arrests and fines would inflame opposition. Despite the appellate ruling, however, police violence was on display. Officers used capsicum spray against protesters at Sydney’s Central Station after the main

demonstration had concluded.

The NSW government doubled down, backing the police attack and declaring it would not accept further mass protests. Victoria’s Labor government confirmed its police would fine the Melbourne protest organisers \$1,652 each. Federal government ministers repeated their denunciations of participants as “irresponsible.”

This shows that the movement against police violence is posed with the necessity for a struggle against the entire political order.

As in the US, what is required is a turn to broader layers of the working class, who are being politicised by unprecedented social inequality, the inadequate official response to the pandemic, the billions of dollars provided to the major corporations in government bailouts, mass unemployment and the further pro-business restructuring being enforced by governments and the unions.

This wider assault demonstrates the reactionary character of attempts, including by the protest organisers, to present police violence as a solely racial phenomenon. This serves to cover up the fundamental class issues and divide workers along racial and national lines, while promoting the interests of an affluent layer of the upper-middle class.

Police violence, including the appalling and disproportionate killings and assaults inflicted on Aborigines, is above all a class phenomenon. Its purpose is to oppress and brutalise the working class, in defence of the capitalist profit system and a tiny financial oligarchy.

The fight against state violence requires the unity of the entire working class, in a common struggle for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies. This would include dismantling the police and the military, and placing the banks and corporations under public ownership, to create a society based on social equality.

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