

Six arrested at banned Australian protest against police violence

By Martin Scott
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Six people were arrested in Sydney yesterday before a planned protest against police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Following a New South Wales (NSW) Supreme Court decision on Sunday to ban the demonstration on the grounds that it contravened public health orders, organisers changed the venue from Sydney Town Hall to the Domain, a 34-hectare park with a capacity of around 80,000 people.

A massive police presence already had assembled throughout the expansive space when protesters arrived on site shortly before the rally was due to start.

Those detained included protest co-organiser Paddy Gibson, who was dragged away by police within seconds of beginning to address a gaggle of reporters. Gibson and four other protesters were charged with breaching public health orders and fined \$1,000, while the sixth detainee was served with a Criminal Infringement Notice for offensive language.

The arrests compelled the organisers to call the demonstration off.

The police operation was a significant assault on civil liberties. It was preceded by a hysterical campaign of vilification directed against the organisers. Liberal-National and Labor politicians denounced them as “selfish,” and insisted that the event be stopped, hypocritically invoking the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio yesterday morning, protest co-organiser Paul Silva commented on the false character of claims by the NSW Liberal-National government and police that they were suppressing the protest in the interests of public health.

Silva said: “Everyday living is risky with regard to the pandemic. Going shopping at your local Woolies [supermarket], or catching public transport in the city is

a risk. Our protest is peaceful and with all the commercial gatherings happening around Australia now as we speak, I believe we can social distance at the Sydney Domain.”

Silva’s uncle was David Dungay Jr, an Aboriginal man with schizophrenia and diabetes who died in Sydney’s Long Bay jail in 2015 after being smothered by prison guards and injected with midazolam, a powerful sedative.

While a coronial inquest into Dungay Jr’s death found that the forceful restraint, the sedative and incorrectly administered resuscitation contributed to his death, the guards were not held responsible and have not been charged.

In the lead up to yesterday’s demonstration, organisers repeatedly offered to call off the protest if a new investigation was launched into the incident.

Instead, NSW Police resorted to threats of \$1,000 fines or even imprisonment for anyone present at the rally. This menacing approach presented a significant disincentive for participants to fill out a contact tracing form circulated by organisers in an effort to be as COVID-safe as possible.

Any pretence that public health is a primary concern of the ruling elite is clearly false.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, along with her counterparts in other states and Prime Minister Scott Morrison, remains adamant that schools and workplaces must remain open. Crowd limits in pubs, licensed clubs, restaurants, and football stadiums continue to be eased despite the recent wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

This program, which flies in the face of calls from epidemiologists and other medical experts for immediate measures to eradicate coronavirus community transmission, is dictated solely by the profit

interests of the corporate and financial elite.

While Victoria is at the centre of the current surge, NSW has experienced a number of outbreaks and increased community transmission over the past several weeks as a direct result of this relentless back-to-work drive.

Despite concerted efforts by the corporate media and government figures to link the rise in cases in Victoria to earlier protests against police violence, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services has ruled out any such connection.

Nevertheless, NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said on 2GB radio last week: “From our perspective it was obviously big numbers in Victoria, a number of people who came to the protest were living in those vertical towers so that certainly is enough for me.”

Fuller was referring, without any substantiation, to residents of the public housing blocks that the Victorian state Labor government locked down earlier this month after COVID-19 infections emerged inside some of the buildings.

Throughout the pandemic, Australian governments have resorted to rumour and outright falsification to promote the idea that coronavirus infections are caused solely by the actions of reckless individuals.

The massive showing of police force at peaceful demonstrations, along with the deployment of military personnel to COVID-19 hotspots, mirrors the Trump administration’s unconstitutional use of heavily-armed federal agents to violently disperse and detain protesters in Portland and other US cities.

While recent efforts to shut down demonstrations have been veiled in phoney health concerns, the reality is that the current campaign is an extension of longstanding moves to criminalise public protest and other opposition.

Following mass demonstrations across the country last year over climate change, state and federal governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, rushed to pass enhanced anti-protest laws.

Last October, at least 50 Extinction Rebellion protesters were arrested at peaceful protests. Some were slapped with draconian bail conditions preventing them from entering central Sydney or communicating with other members of the movement.

The process did not begin in 2019, however. When

introducing Tasmanian anti-activism measures in 2016, then state Resources Minister Paul Harriss clearly expressed the motivation behind the new laws.

Harriss said: “The central objective of the government is to ensure wealth-creating businesses can develop and grow free from disruptive protest action that prevents them from operating on a normal commercial basis.”

The acceleration of attacks on democratic rights is directed, above all, against the working class.

The organisers of yesterday’s rally failed to win significant public support, with only a handful of people seeking to assemble, not simply because of the police threats, but also due to their bankrupt political perspective.

Composed of Aboriginal nationalist and pseudo-left groups, they present police violence in purely racial terms. This serves to divide the working class and cover up the role of the state as an instrument of class rule.

Mass multi-ethnic, multi-racial demonstrations took place across Australia last month in solidarity with the international protests triggered by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and appalling Aboriginal deaths in custody.

The demonstrations were also animated by broader issues, including mounting anger over the criminally-negligent and profit-driven official response to the pandemic, soaring social inequality and the intensifying onslaught on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

The assault on civil liberties, including the right to protest, is motivated by fears within the ruling elite that these sentiments will erupt in major social and political struggles of the working class.

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