

Australian state Labor government's lies about "protest violence" exposed

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The Labor Party government in the Australian state of Queensland has been exposed as justifying new anti-protest legislation by falsely accusing environmental demonstrators of using deadly booby traps. It is a case study in how capitalist governments of all stripes fabricate allegations and concoct fear campaigns to try to silence dissent amid mounting political and social discontent.

This week Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk claimed in state parliament that protesters were using "sinister tactics"—cylinders and drums containing glass fragments, "even butane gas containers, so that anyone trying to cut a protester free will be injured, or worse."

Palaszczuk said Queensland Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll had showed her evidence of protesters using "locking devices laced with traps that are dangerous" to prevent themselves being removed from roads and railway lines.

The premier denounced recent demonstrations in the state capital, Brisbane, organised by the Extinction Rebellion group, in which protesters stopped traffic. "Blocking roads is dangerous, it's reckless, it's irresponsible, it's selfish and it's stupid," she charged. Even though police violently removed protesters and arrested more than 70 people using existing laws, Palaszczuk declared: "I now believe we need new ones [laws]."

In a video posted on social media to support her claims, Palaszczuk displayed images allegedly showing one such "sinister" cylinder. It soon became known, however, that the image was from a protest in the state's north that occurred in January 2018.

Police at the time claimed that the concrete cylinder contained "metal and pipes" and was potentially dangerous, but made no allegation the protesters' intent was to cause injury. Moreover, Queensland police have

never charged a climate protester with an offence concerning setting a trap. Police told the *Guardian* that locking-on devices had the capacity to cause harm but were "designed to delay the attempts of police to extricate protesters."

Extinction Rebellion and other protest groups vehemently denied using such tactics. Representatives pointed out that if Palaszczuk's claims were true, police would have laid extra charges and produced evidence in court, but that had not happened.

Under Labor's proposed laws, protesters caught using certain "devices" would face up to two years in prison or a \$6,500 fine, and up to one year behind bars or a \$2,600 fine for merely possessing them. Police would have the power to search people they "reasonably suspected" possessed such devices, in addition to the wide-ranging search powers they already have.

Exactly what "devices" would be outlawed has not been announced, giving rise to fears they could include ordinary household items. The government said it would "consult with the community" on which items would be proscribed, but vowed that the laws would be introduced by the end of the year.

Protesters obstructing traffic or resisting arrest already face court-imposed fines up to \$61,000, while governments punish serious breaches of environmental law by mining companies with minor penalties that bear no relationship to their profits.

Although the as-yet-unpublished laws supposedly relate to protests that block roads, rail lines or mining projects, the government's scare-mongering would apply to any political demonstration that allegedly causes public inconvenience or offends undefined "social values."

Police Minister Mark Ryan claimed Queensland had

entered a new era of “extremist” action. “[T]he actions we are witnessing now are not protests,” he insisted. “These extremists wilfully disrupt the right of others to go about their daily lives without interruption. This is contrary to the shared values of our democratic society.”

This is part of a barrage of anti-protest laws. Agriculture Minister Mark Furner said he would introduce a bill this week so people found guilty of trespassing on agricultural premises to protest against animal cruelty could receive a penalty of up to one year in jail. In April, the Palaszczuk government authorised police and biosecurity officers to issue on-the-spot fines of \$652.17 to such demonstrators, on top of existing trespass penalties.

Last month, the federal Liberal-National government, backed by Labor, began to push through parliament a bill that could see people jailed for up to five years for using social media, emails or phone calls to promote, or even advertise, protests against agribusinesses. Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government is simultaneously working with state governments to impose harsher jail terms on people physically participating in demonstrations, adding to expanded anti-protest laws imposed over the past three years.

These laws criminalise protests that allegedly disrupt business operations. They can be used more broadly to suppress opposition, including industrial action by workers, to the deepening assault by governments and the corporate elite on jobs, living standards and social conditions.

The laws blatantly attack fundamental democratic rights, including free speech, free movement and freedom to associate. They add to the police-state measures—such as detention without trial, cancellation of citizenships, mass surveillance and the outlawing of organisations—imposed by successive Coalition and Labor governments since 2001, primarily on the pretext of combatting terrorism.

None of these measures is aimed at protecting the public, whether from terrorists or “unsafe” protests. Rather they are designed to quash the growing anger and opposition being produced by the worsening social inequality, attacks on jobs and social conditions, and the US-led drive to war in the Middle East and against China.

The Queensland government’s measures are bound

up with a further sharp turn by Labor nationally to more openly embrace pro-business policies in the wake of its disastrous defeat at the May 18 federal election. It is no coincidence that Palaszczuk and her ministers announced their legislation just before this weekend’s state Labor Party conference, which will be addressed by federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese, who has spearheaded Labor’s rightward turn.

While those taking part in the Extinction Rebellion protests are alarmed about the dangers of climate change, its leaders appeal to the very governments enacting these repressive laws to “act now” to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to “net zero” by 2025. These governments, however, continue to ignore urgent scientific warnings and recommendations, enacting instead policies that allow corporations to continue to pollute.

In reality, production under capitalism is directed solely to expand the private wealth of the ruling class and boost the powers of warring nation-states, regardless of the social or environmental costs. The resulting catastrophe can be averted only if the working class overturns the profit system and reorganises society globally on a socialist basis. Only then could humanity’s immense productive, technical and scientific capacities be harnessed to overcome the challenges of rising sea levels, accelerating emissions, loss of biodiversity and desertification.



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