

Australian police rampage against protesters at massive weapons expo in Melbourne

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12 September 2024

In extraordinary and disturbing scenes yesterday, riot police used high-powered weaponry against mostly peaceful anti-war protesters on the streets of Melbourne, carrying out a series of violent assaults.

The attacks had the character of a coordinated and pre-planned police rampage aimed at intimidating the population and curtailing, if not abolishing, the right to public demonstration. The cops, mobilised by the Victorian state Labor administration, no doubt acting in coordination with the federal Labor government, were deployed to ensure that nothing hindered the International Land Defence Exposition.

Billed by its organisers as the “premier platform for interaction between defence, industry and government of all levels,” the exposition is one of the largest in the world to promote, trade and develop land-based weapons systems. That is, the police violence outside was aimed at protecting and facilitating the far broader use of violence by the imperialist powers being plotted inside the event.

The conference website states that this year’s event features more than 800 organisers and exhibitors. All of the major weapons companies implicated in the war crimes and horrors perpetrated by American and allied imperialism over the past forty years are present, including such entities as Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems.

Elbit Systems, the premier Israeli arms manufacturer and dealer, is participating, as are top-level officials of the American government, its military and its allied states. That means the main parties responsible for the genocide in Gaza, involving the mass murder of an estimated 200,000 Palestinians in less than a year, are all represented.

Protesters centrally raised the conference’s role as a hub for the orchestrators and planners of this modern-day Holocaust as one of their main motives for participating.

One demonstrator, Charlie, told the WSWs: “Knowing that the government is a principal sponsor of this expo with massive, including Israeli, weapons companies, during a time when we know there’s a genocide occurring and Israel and the US are responsible feels really sneaky. Our taxes are essentially going towards putting an event like this on.

Obviously, people are completely disturbed and outraged by children being bombed daily.”

These clear anti-war and humane sentiments have been buried by the political and media establishment, which has almost universally presented the protesters as a deranged mob whose hostility to the Exposition is inexplicable.

Significantly, this campaign, aimed at legitimising police violence, began before any protests had occurred. It was spearheaded by the Labor-aligned and purportedly “liberal” *Guardian* newspaper.

In a bizarre article on Sunday, the *Guardian* declared, “As many as 25,000 protesters are set to cause chaos ahead of a weapons expo to be held in Melbourne on Wednesday.” It did not attempt to explain this certain sense of impending “chaos,” nor where the highly specific figure of 25,000, repeated by a host of other mainstream publications, came from.

Some of them asserted that a protest of that size would be the “largest in decades,” even though far larger protests have been held against the genocide multiple weeks over the past year. The *Guardian* article, appearing without a byline, was crude propaganda on behalf of the Victorian Labor government and police, aimed at justifying a massive state mobilisation.

That has included the deployment of some 1,800 police from throughout the state and the establishment of a one-kilometre ring of fencing around the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, where the event is being held. Police also announced that they would have the use of extraordinary anti-terror powers to search and demand the identity of anyone in the vicinity of the exhibition.

In effect, a significant part of central Melbourne, the second-largest city in Australia, has been turned into an exclusion zone with the basic rights of the population abrogated to ensure serenity prevails among the military generals, arms dealers and assorted war criminals participating in the exposition.

Despite the bogus media predictions of a massive turnout, yesterday’s protests were in the low thousands, as was

entirely foreseeable given they occurred during the working week. The participation meant that cops at times outnumbered demonstrators.

The Public Order Response Team (PORT), effectively the riot squad, was at the front and centre, its members decked out with futuristic helmets like something out of a combat zone or *Star Wars*.

The PORT repeatedly used “flashbang” stun grenades, shot “foam” rubber bullets and indiscriminately deployed tear gas against entire groups of protesters. Upon detonation, a “flashbang” grenade produces a blinding flash of light and a deafening bang. It is unclear whether such weaponry has ever been used against demonstrators in Australia before. Chilling footage has emerged, including of one PORT cop shooting the bullets at protesters who were a considerable distance from him and posed no risk.

A statement this morning by Melbourne Activist Legal Support (MALS), which fielded a team of 20 independent legal observers, noted that the police actions likely constituted a violation of international human rights law.

The MALS noted instances of: “OC [pepper] spray deployed at persons moving away from police lines; rubber bullets deployed at short-range; indiscriminate use of OC spray upon large crowds; use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and flash-bangs against idle persons including persons with hands raised and those attempting to move away from police lines.” Police had randomly punched people and slammed them into walls.

The MALS legal observers themselves “were assaulted, OC sprayed, pushed and grabbed by police,” as were clearly marked medical volunteers.

While noting the “chaotic behaviour” of some protesters, including those who engaged in clashes with police, the MALS stated that unruly behaviour by a minority of demonstrators “became heightened after and in response to a coercive crowd control manoeuvre by the police or the use of police weapons,” i.e., it was provoked. The legal experts also made the obvious point that the “behaviour of individual protesters does not justify excessive force against others nor the use of force against entire crowds.”

These basic realities have been completely covered up by the political and media establishment. Presenting themselves and their thug cops as the aggrieved and victimised party, a conga line of police officials and politicians, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, has deplored the purported violence of the demonstrators.

Aside from turning reality on its head, this can only be described as thoroughly hypocritical. For the past year, Albanese and co. have steadfastly supported Israel, including with defence export approvals, as it has carried out massive genocidal violence against the Palestinian people.

The events in Melbourne are a sharp warning. Since the genocide began, the ruling elite has been aiming to ban demonstrations against the mass murder. Albanese and the state Labor administrations only pulled back from that course of action last October for fear that an outright criminalisation of protests would provoke massive and uncontrollable opposition. But these authoritarian plans were deferred, not abandoned, and the police mobilisation around the exposition marks a new step in their implementation.

That agenda is not solely directed against opposition to the genocide but hostility to war more broadly. In addition to its complicity in the Israeli war crimes, Australia is actively supporting the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. It is at the very centre of the preparations to open up another front in this developing global war, in the US-led plans for a catastrophic conflict with China.

As they are vastly expanding US basing and the Australian military itself, the Labor government and defence officials have insisted that this must be a “whole-of-nation” war effort, which means an ever greater crackdown on popular opposition.

This broader context and the events in Melbourne themselves underscore the utter bankruptcy of the line that has dominated protests against the genocide, of issuing plaintive appeals to the Labor government and the ruling elite. This perspective, advanced especially by pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative, has served to neuter opposition and subordinate it to the very parties involved in the genocide.

It is almost inevitable that among those who participated in clashes with police were agents provocateurs. But to the extent that genuine anarchistic layers were present, promoting “direct action” and confrontations with the cops, they were simply exhibiting a different variant of the same bankrupt perspective of protest politics, and one that plays directly into the hands of the police.

The fight against the genocide and war requires the independent mobilisation of the working class against the Labor government and the entire pro-war political establishment. That must form a component of the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against the source of conflict, capitalism itself.



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