

# Australia: Victorian Labor government unveils sweeping crackdown on anti-genocide protests

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In an announcement yesterday, Victorian Labor Premier Jacinta Allan announced a series of repressive laws aimed at curtailing or even abolishing the right to protest in the state. The legislation will need to pass parliament, but with support from the Liberal opposition, that is all but guaranteed.

Allan's comments were striking for their authoritarian character. She made no secret that the measures are directed against the mass weekly demonstrations and other protest activities opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza and Australia's complicity in the historic war crimes.

The government, Allan proclaimed, has "had enough of the protests that have caused division and disruption in our streets." In a purported disclaimer, that was in fact highly provocative and inflammatory, she added: "It would be wrong for me to say that everyone who's attending these protests is antisemitic."

The suggestion that large numbers of the protesters are antisemites, motivated by racial hostility to Jewish people, is a slander against a significant segment of the population. At their peak, shortly after the genocide began in October last year, rallies in Melbourne were being attended by well over 50,000 people. Since then, they have continued every weekend, with diminished numbers, but without a single instance of racial or religious vilification.

Allan's slur was an attempt to connect the protests to the firebombing of the Addas Israel Synagogue in Melbourne earlier this month. The premier declared that the crackdown on protests was a response to discussions with Jewish representative groups in the wake of that crime. No one has been arrested for the firebombing, however, which is still being investigated.

There is not the slightest reason to believe it to be connected to the pro-Palestinian protest movement. Its leaders have disavowed antisemitism and all forms of racism time and again. Anti-Zionist Jews have been prominent at the events, both as attendees and as speakers.

In their rush to link the protests with the firebombing, despite the implausibility of the theory and complete lack of evidence, Allan, together with the federal Labor government are discounting all other possibilities. The governments are thus

shielding Melbourne's not insubstantial fascist and neo-Nazi scene, composed of genuine antisemitisms, from any scrutiny.

The measures themselves have no conceivable connection to preventing the firebombing of synagogues, or other places of worship, instead exclusively targeting public protest.

One of the measures is a ban on face coverings, including masks, at protests. This is simply a means of state surveillance and intimidation. Police minister Anthony Carbine declared: "If you stand for something, you don't get to hide behind a mask here in Victoria." That is a police state position, insisting that all dissent and opposition must be identifiable to the state and subject to its repression.

Referring to the mask ban, Allan added "We know they are being used to conceal identities, shield agitators from crowd control measures." That appeared to be a reference to the fact that wearing a mask can protect one from pepper spray used by the police.

One element, ignored by the media but raised by disability advocates, is that the mask ban is also an attack on attempts by individuals to protect themselves from COVID.

All governments, including in Victoria, have dispensed with any safety or mitigation measures to stop the spread of the deadly virus, because of their impact on corporate profit-making activities. Business leaders and other proponents of "let it rip" continue to denounce mask-wearing, because it is a visible reminder that contrary to their claims, the pandemic is not over.

Another measure bans "lock on" devices, used to chain protesters to objects. These, however, have only been used in a handful of pro-Palestinian actions, and have been deployed far more frequently by environmentalists, indicating the broader crackdown. Police will have expanded powers to examine people and cars for "lock on" items, providing a carte blanche for them to conduct warrantless searches.

The legislation will also ban protests from taking place outside synagogues and other places of worship. It is simply not the case, however, that the pro-Palestinian movement has held demonstrations targeting synagogues, because they are Jewish religious institutions.

One of the only protests outside a synagogue, since the genocide began, occurred in Melbourne late last month. It was called, not for religious reasons, but because Zionist leaders had invited top Israeli state officials to give a political talk, legitimising the mass extermination of the Palestinians. In the end, protest organisers cancelled the event, claiming threats of violence if it proceeded.

In the US, a handful of pro-Palestinian protests have been held at synagogues, when they have been used as venues for sales of Israeli-occupied land in the West Bank. Such sales are a violation of international law.

Civil liberties groups have noted that the ban extends beyond these immediate questions. The law, for instance, would presumably bar survivors of child sexual abuse from rallying outside a church or other religious institution to demand redress for the crimes committed against them.

Another element of the legislation would make it a serious crime to display “hate” or “terrorist” symbols. In the neighbouring state of New South Wales (NSW), where such laws already exist, they have been used against opponents of the Israeli rampage in the Middle East.

In September, when Israel began a massive bombardment of Lebanon, thousands of people of Lebanese descent joined the pro-Palestinian protests in Sydney, the NSW capital. Some allegedly carried flags associated with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organisation being targeted by Israel.

Despite being one of Lebanon’s largest political parties, Hezbollah was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in Australia, in a murky process involving the direct input of Zionist leaders. A 22-year-old woman was arrested and charged with carrying such a flag, a jailable offence. This week, NSW Police conducted raids in working-class south-western Sydney, still hunting people who had allegedly flown such flags three months ago.

The vague and far-reaching nature of the measures, and the frothing statements of Allan, demonstrate that the laws are an attempt to ban pro-Palestinian protests altogether. That has been the perspective of the state and federal Labor administrations since the genocide began.

While they have been unable to fully illegalise the demonstrations, the governments have never repudiated this aim. In NSW, the state Labor administration unsuccessfully attempted to have a pro-Palestinian protest banned in Sydney, on the pretense of trauma surrounding the October 7 anniversary, while Allan and other Victorian government leaders demanded that people stay home, in a clear attack on basic civil liberties.

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has repeatedly denounced and slandered protesters, including labelling peaceful anti-genocide student encampments at universities as “hateful” and “divisive” displays that did not have a place in society.

The far-reaching nature of what is being prepared was

indicated by comments from Jillian Segal in the wake of the Melbourne synagogue firebombing. A businesswoman and professional Zionist lobbyist, Segal was appointed Australia’s Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism by Albanese earlier this year, despite having publicly supported Israeli war crimes, including the bombing of hospitals.

Segal spent most of an interview with the Special Broadcasting Service, ostensibly responding to the firebombing, denouncing pro-Palestinian protests. Referencing them, she said “The cities should not be utilised for that... That is not to in any way attack the right of people to express their views, but at some point, [holding protests] every single week becomes intimidatory in the city.”

Of course, Segal’s statements are an attack on the right to free expression, and a proposal for a police state. Extraordinarily, she added that “There should be places designated away from where the Jewish community might venture, where people can demonstrate.”

Segal’s comments effectively erased the Jewish identity of the many anti-Zionist Jews who have taken part in the protests. Many would consider that to be clear antisemitism. In addition, if her proposal were taken at face value, it would entail the establishment of some form of state-enforced racial segregation, including restrictions on where Jewish people can and cannot go.

That an individual capable of making such statements, who is clearly continuing to function as a pro-Israel lobbyist, is a de facto member of the Albanese government underscores its commitment to the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians. Labor has supported the onslaught politically, diplomatically and materially, for more than 12 months.

Segal’s comments, as well as those of Allan, give the lie to Labor’s attempts to distant itself from the atrocities, including with mealy-mouthed calls for a ceasefire.

It should also be noted that Allan is a member of Labor’s “Socialist Left” faction. So too was her predecessor, Daniel Andrews, who now regularly speaks before Zionist lobbyists defending Israel’s mass slaughter of women and children as a just war. That underscores the character of the entire Labor Party, and all its factions, as a rotten and criminal instrument of imperialism, war and authoritarianism.



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