

Neo-Nazis hold public gathering on Australia Day

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30 January 2025

For the second year in a row, the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network (NSN) has held a public mobilisation on Australia Day, the nationalist public holiday that falls on January 26. Around forty of its members rallied in Adelaide, the South Australian capital, while other far-right forces held a few events elsewhere.

The numbers involved are very small, and the NSN, to the extent that it is known, is a despised grouping. The event nevertheless raises several political issues that are of relevance to workers and young people, which have been covered up in the mainstream media and by official politicians.

As with an attempted NSN Australia Day protest in Sydney last year, its demonstration in Adelaide was both a national gathering and one that was broken up by the police.

Members whose identities have been exposed after they were arrested by the police had travelled from interstate, particularly Victoria, but also from elsewhere in the country. They had assembled at the Adelaide War Memorial, dressed in black fatigues. The group chanted racist slogans, such as “Australia for the white man, the rest must go.”

It appears that the state police broke up the rally fairly rapidly. At least 17 members of the NSN were arrested, most have since been bailed. The police effectively employed draconian legislation, barring public protests that do not have official authorisation.

The Nazis were not directly charged under the protest laws, but most were instead arrested on minor offences such as loitering. Some were accused of resisting arrest. Two were arrested for displaying Nazi symbols, with the NSN claiming that one of them was over a tattoo.

Previously, the NSN has often been treated with kid gloves by the authorities, especially in the state of Victoria where it is headquartered. The group has held marches, involving racist slogans, without police intervention. Its members have on at least one occasion roamed the streets of Melbourne “hunting Jews.”

The most revealing incident occurred in October 2023. Having pled guilty to “violent disorder” over an altercation

that they were involved in, NSN leaders Thomas Sewell and Jacob Hersant were given lenient sentences. The presiding judge then significantly declared: “I consider that in both of your cases, your prospects for rehabilitation are good. Good luck with the future gentlemen.” Hersant immediately went outside to a waiting media pack and gave a Nazi salute.

The group is undoubtedly under close police and intelligence scrutiny, and at times the authorities have shown a harsher attitude than did the Victorian judge. However, it is striking that two of the largest police mobilisations against the NSN were aimed at blocking their gatherings on Australia Day.

This seems, at least in part, to be motivated by the awkward fact that the Nazis are enthusiastic proponents of the national holiday. When speaking to the media about their court appearances this year, the NSN members all wished the journalists a “happy Australia Day” and declared they simply wished to celebrate the national holiday. Last year, an NSN contingent was broken up before it was able to join official Australia Day celebrations in the Sydney CBD.

Government leaders and media commentators have declared that the NSN’s attempts to associate itself with Australia Day are an affront to the event, which they claim is associated with “multiculturalism.” In reality, Australia Day is a confected event, which only began to be “celebrated” on a large scale in the late 1980s.

It commemorates the 1788 landing of the First Fleet, the beginning of the mass British colonisation of Australia and the systematic assault on its indigenous population. The NSN and other far-right forces glorify colonisation, which is one of the reasons they are enamoured of January 26, along with its broader promotion of flag-waving jingoism.

In recent years, there has been a debate within the political establishment over potentially changing the date of Australia Day to one less associated with the brutal record of colonialism. Proponents of changing the date, frequently practitioners of Aboriginal nationalism and identity politics, are essentially seeking a more palatable form of Australian nationalism.

While the date has remained, government leaders now frequently make some reference to the brutality inflicted on the indigenous population. That only serves as a cover for the ongoing exploitation of most Aboriginal people, who now constitute the most oppressed section of the working class and experience shocking levels of poverty, homelessness and social misery as a direct result of the policies of successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition.

Despite Australia Day being held on January 26, the right-wing have bemoaned this slight shift in emphasis. Significantly, Coalition leader Peter Dutton, himself a far-right figure, campaigned on this question in the opening weeks of the year. He denounced Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese for failing to compel local councils to hold Australia Day events, declaring that this showed “the country is in trouble.” Dutton added, “Australia Day is sacrosanct.”

The media coverage of the NSN rally has ignored the fact that the Nazis were gathering on exactly the same basis. “The government refuses to celebrate Australia Day,” their advertisement stated, going on to falsely claim that the federal government was funding Indigenous Invasion Day events on January 26.

That confluence is not simply a question of Australia Day. The obvious point that has been evaded in the official reaction is that the NSN and other fascist forces have been buoyed by the promotion of the far-right internationally.

That finds its consummate expression in the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, pledged to a program of mass roundups and deportations, dictatorial rule and naked imperial aggression. The week before the NSN rally, Trump gave an inauguration speech clearly modelled on Hitler, while his right-hand man, billionaire Elon Musk, twice delivered Nazi salutes.

On January 21, the day of Trump’s inauguration, NSN leader Thomas Sewell replied to a post by far-right US personality Nick Fuentes about Musk’s salutes. Sewell’s post was of him giving his own Nazi salute, with the caption “Donald Trump White Power! Patriots are in control.” Elsewhere, Sewell has criticised Trump for not going far enough, noting for instance that there are Jewish people in Trump’s circle and that he defends the “deep state.”

Sewell and other NSN leaders, however, have repeatedly stated that Trump and other far-right forces in the political mainstream express a shift to the right, for which they take some credit.

That common ground, between avowed Nazis and a wing of the political establishment moving towards authoritarianism, is buried in the official discussion. That is no surprise, given that in Australia, as internationally,

Albanese, Dutton and the entire establishment have normalised Trump’s victory and pledged to work with him.

The same symmetry is evident in the NSN’s broader trajectory. Its predecessor groups were largely based on the anti-Muslim bigotry, promoted by the establishment over the course of the “war on terror.” They latched on to corporate media and Coalition campaigns over a purported crisis of “African gangs.”

During the pandemic, they were active in the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movement that was used as a battering ram by sections of the political establishment to end public health measures that were viewed as an impediment to corporate profit-making activities.

The NSN is no doubt at times an irritant of the establishment, but the fundamental point is that it is a creature of their making, and one that their own shift to the right helps to nurture. The NSN’s provocative and sometimes violent activities, while often tolerated, also create the pretext for attacks on democratic rights.

Some South Australian politicians, including federal Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, responded to the NSN’s Australia Day protest by calling for the Albanese government to designate it as a “terrorist organisation.” Hanson-Young claimed the NSN had “invaded our local city,” as though there are no right-wingers in Adelaide.

More generally, hers was a call for expanded state powers. Under conditions of war, austerity and authoritarianism, such a designation of the NSN, based primarily on their repugnant political speech, would inevitably form a precedent for attacks on genuine left-wing opposition to the state, including from the socialist movement.



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