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The right to march **MUST** be defended

Collective Action

November 25, 2017

Over the past four days we have watched with horror, disgust and anger as Papua New Guinean police, immigration and navy, under the effective direction of the Australian government, have beaten and brutalized refugees detained on Manus Island.

This violent outburst came as the Australian government sought to break a determined and courageous protest by the refugees on Manus. Over a year ago the PNG supreme court ruled that the Australian government's Manus Island refugee prison was unlawful. Australia has sought to circumvent this decision by simply moving refugees from one prison to another. After four years of imprisonment the 600 men remaining in the Manus Island prison decided to resist, and refused to be moved.

In the words of Iranian journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani:

The reality inside Manus prison and the reasons for the refugee resistance are totally different to

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what is stated in some media and claimed in official public statements. When the refugees engage in discussions, all their dialogues have one thing in common: “We won’t put up with being incarcerated anymore. We have no energy left to go from this prison to another prison. We haven’t committed any crime and we can’t tolerate prison any longer.”

The refugees detained on Manus have shown immense courage and determination in resisting the persecution and violence perpetrated at the behest of the Australian government. Their stand demands our active support and solidarity. Responding to this demand requires all the tools of protest at our disposal.

It is not good enough for refugee advocates to simply “bear witness”, to confine ourselves to politely asking the government to stop being so evil please, or to moan on about how the government doesn’t act “in our name”. The crisis on Manus Island must become a political crisis in Australia.

However, Manus Island will not become a crisis in Australia unless the forces who purport to act in solidarity with refugees are prepared to take the action needed to make it a crisis. The challenge is that for twenty years, the barbarian treatment of refugees has had bipartisan political support. Both the Liberal and Labor parties have done their part implementing, maintaining, and deepening the brutality of the border regime. They have done this with the support or apathetic acquiescence of an apparent majority in Australian society.

That said, the situation is not and has never been impossible. A determined and sizeable social movement can force a government and a society to make change. But again, in order to do this, it must create a situation in which its demands can no longer be ignored. The challenge has always been to build a campaign that that forces everyone in our society to pay at-

tention, to decide which side they are on, and to act. The crisis on Manus demands disruptive protest; sit-ins, lock-ons, barricades, rallies, blockades, and yes, even marches.

We are seeing signs of this movement emerging, but we are also seeing challenges and push back from the state.

All too often, social movements in Australia forget that the “right to protest” is not derived from some piece of legislation nor is it handed down from on high by a benevolent government. The methods, types and extent of “acceptable” protest are defined through a process of conflict. The space of protest is a contested space, and the only rights we ever have in that space are the ones we successfully demand, defend and exercise.

On any issue that challenges the state, the political status quo and business as usual; the police and the state stand in opposition to the right to protest. At every juncture, the state seeks to push back against the “rights” that social movements have achieved. New laws are passed, new police powers granted, and new penalties are imposed. As we continue to experiment with new ways of protesting, and as our campaigns achieve the disruption that is necessary to force change, the state and its repressive instruments push back.

Every time the state pushes back, we are faced with a choice. We either acquiesce and retreat, or fight to exercise the right to protest that we’ve claimed. If we concede in the face of an attack on the right to demonstrate, we progressively lose the rights of protest that were hard won. Whenever the police try and restrict the right to protest, we must push back.

The right to march is under threat in Melbourne. Over several years demonstrators in diverse movements (notably the series Stop the Forces Closures rallies) have claimed the right to both march and occupy certain public intersections for the purposes of protest. Victoria Police doubtless despise this practice, and have gradually (and at times forcefully) moved to restrict this form of protest.

Which brings us back to the action necessary in response to the situation on Manus. For the past three weeks the Refugee Action Collective has called for Friday evening rallies, marches and sit-ins, and for the past three weeks Victoria Police have mobilised dozens of mounted police and hundreds of public order response officers to restrict these marches.

The police are making a claim about what is acceptable in protest. For the length of this campaign, the standard protest practice has been a rally at the State Library almost invariably followed by a march to Flinders Street station. For three weeks Victoria Police have blocked the road at Bourke Street. Last week, demonstrators acquiesced to this show of force from Victoria Police. The march ended at the intersection of Bourke Street, and the police achieved their objectives.

It should come as no surprise then, that yesterday, Victoria Police again mobilised in force to stop a Manus solidarity demonstration from undertaking the most basic of protest marches. Yesterday, fortunately, demonstrators defied the police and ultimately forced a march to Flinders Street.

This fight for the right to demonstrate never ends. If we do not push back, if we surrender the right to “march down the road”, we will ultimately be left with the choice of sitting on the grass in the front of the State Library or facing police batons and pepper spray on Swanston Street. And you can bet, if we reached that situation, if that became normal, Victoria Police would discover a sudden concern for the welfare of grass.

On Friday in Melbourne we saw who was prepared to defend the democratic space we NEED in order to fight for refugee rights and for a thousand other struggles, and we saw who would rather acquiesce to the police.

The struggle of the hundreds of refugees detained on Manus Island demands solidarity. The critical question is, as always, “which side are you on?”