

# Anti-war marches in Australia and New Zealand

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Melbourne started the global anti-war demonstrations early with a rally and march on Friday March 18. The rally was lively, with over a thousand people, though this had dwindled to a few hundred by the time the march ended with a sit-in outside the main railway station.

Despite the enthusiastic crowd what was missing was the visible presence of Muslim communities who had previously been an important part of the movement.

While its obviously a huge decrease on the numbers from the start of the war on Iraq two years ago, it was clear on Friday that there is still a huge amount of anger at the war and at Australian involvement in it. With 450 new Australian troops about to be sent, this is an immediate issue for the movement here.

This though has also meant that the movement here has more of a bring the troops home focus, rather than a directly anti-imperialist one. But what is also clear is that the government is not prepared to tolerate too much dissent.

Sydney managed to pull out around 3000 people for a march and rally where they were addressed by, among other people, Guantanamo survivor Mamdouh Habib.

Mamdouh may have been released from US custody but he has had his passport confiscated and the Australian government has not ruled out charging him here ? despite the reasons for his release being that there is no evidence against him.

Presumably they want to further test out their anti-terror laws that are currently being used to prosecute a case against Australian Jack Thomas. Jack spent five months in a prison in Pakistan. After over 100 hours of torture and duress he gave an interview, without a lawyer, to the Australian Federal police. Evidence from that is currently being used to construct a case against him on the charge of terrorism.

At the same time activists from Melbourne group Women for Peace have been charged over peaceful demonstrations at the Shrine of Remembrance and Dr Will Saunders and David Burgess, the activists who painted anti-war slogans on the Sydney Opera House, face 9 months of periodic detention and payment of \$151,000.

This heavy-handed approach confirms not just the Howard government's intention to continue with its US coalition no matter what, but also that dissent will be severely punished.

Across the ditch in New Zealand, anti-war activists are also being harrassed by the police. Weekend marches of about 200 in Auckland and similar in Wellington were policed so harshly that several activists have already made complaints. Four people were arrested in Auckland and photographic evidence shows extremely brutal policing.

Unwilling to be silenced by police brutality Auckland activists organised a rally against police violence for

Monday. A further five were arrested whilst supporting a friend in the District Court.

On both sides of the Tasman there are still plenty of people standing up against war and imperialism and a state which is coming down hard on our dissent.

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