



14 April 2020

## Don't let coronavirus stamp out the right to protest

### Free the refugees | Dutton is the real COVID criminal

Victoria Police have used draconian powers to stamp out dissent, in a move that has implications for unions, climate activists and all movements for justice and change.

On Good Friday, they arrested Refugee Action Collective member Chris Breen in his house, held him for nine hours at Preston police station, seized his electronic devices (including his son's) and charged him with incitement under section 321G of the Crimes Act 1958 for involvement in a RAC car convoy.

If Breen is found guilty, it creates a precedent that could be used against anyone planning a rally, a protest or a picket line. It is a threat to all our liberties and further evidence of the arbitrary way policy are using their health powers.

The same day, police also harassed dozens of activists taking part in the RAC convoy, which had been organised as a demonstration of compassion and solidarity with refugees in the Mantra Hotel in the Melbourne suburb of Preston.

Police took the details of 26 participants in the convoy, telling them they may receive infringement notices with fines of \$1652 each, a total of almost \$43,000. At least one was threatened with arrest.

The activity was entirely safe, with activists isolated in cars, with no more than two occupants from the same household.

It was safer than going shopping, safer than travelling on public transport, safer than non-essential work that continues, and safer by an order of magnitude than being stuck in a sealed corridor in the Mantra.

It was as safe as the car convoy conducted the previous day by the United Workers Union to promote the #NoWorkerLeftBehind campaign for wage justice, which the police did not prevent from taking place.

And it was as safe as the CFA car convoy in Eildon on Easter Sunday to celebrate a resident's 100th birthday, which had no police presence and was celebrated in the media.

Meanwhile, the situation for refugees in the Mantra is appalling, with up to three people sharing a room, no soap and no room for social distancing in common areas.

The men are surrounded at close quarters by Serco guards without PPE during meals and other activities, in direct breach of COVID-19 physical isolation guidelines. Serco guards fly in from all over the country.

The Mantra is like a cruise ship on land – if COVID-19 breaks out, it could affect every refugee. These men came to Australia under Medevac legislation and have conditions like diabetes, respiratory problems, kidney disease and Crohn's disease.

More than 1200 doctors have signed a letter calling for the release of refugees from detention. ALP federal MPs Ged Kearney and Peter Khalil have also called for their release and for income support for refugees in the community.

Premier Dan Andrews should be using the health powers to free refugees, rather than quashing safely conducted protest and political dissent.

RAC was right to exercise compassion on Good Friday and signal support for the men in Mantra.

We, the undersigned, join RAC in calling for:

- 1) The charge against Chris Breen to be dropped.
- 2) No infringement notices to be issued.
- 3) Refugees and asylum-seekers to be released into community care.
- 4) Government approval of car convoys and other safe forms of political protest.