

Australia: To 'inconvenience' now a major crime in NSW

Friday 23 December 2022, by [DYNES Emma](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2022).

Deanna "Violet" Coco this month was sentenced to fifteen months' jail, with a non-parole period of eight months, for the "crime" of blocking one lane of traffic on a Sydney bridge for 25 minutes as part of a climate change protest. She has since been released on bail pending an appeal, but a dozen more climate activists have been similarly charged for "serious disruption" of pedestrians and vehicles in the meantime. This is the most serious attack on the right to protest in Australia in decades.

Coco is the first person to be convicted under changes brought by the Roads and Crimes Legislation Amendment Bill 2022, which became law in April. The draconian changes introduce severe penalties for "behaviour that causes damage or disruption to major roads or major facilities". For simply protesting on roads, rail lines, bridges, or in tunnels and worksites, activists can be fined up to \$22,000 and jailed for up to two years.

NSW Liberal Premier Dominic Perrottet described the jailing as "pleasing to see", saying that protest should be allowed only if it "doesn't inconvenience people". The presiding magistrate, Allison Hawkins, reportedly described Coco's actions as a "childish stunt", which had caused the "entire city [to] suffer" as a result of her "selfish emotional actions". Labor opposition leader Chris Minns was quick to join the reactionary chorus, saying: "When you inconvenience literally hundreds of thousands of people ... there will be legislation action to that", and that he has "no regrets" about supporting the authoritarian measures.

In NSW then, the right to avoid "inconvenience" trumps not only the democratic right to protest, but also the right to a habitable planet. Causing a worse-than-usual traffic jam is punishable by jail time, but not the inconvenience caused by waiting for ambulances that never arrive in the middle of a pandemic. Nor the inconvenience of spending hours waiting in under-resourced hospital emergency departments or waiting years for public housing. We are expected to put up with it when it's the government inconveniencing us to the point of destroying lives and endangering our health, while people attempting to raise the alarm about environmental destruction are branded detestable criminals.

The real agenda of the government is to demonise protest and ensure that only ineffective ones take place. Effective protest, whether it's strikes and picket lines, sit-ins or mass marches, almost always cause disruption and inconvenience of some sort. History shows that such actions are essential to winning social change. Segregation in the US South was overthrown through a long-term mass civil disobedience campaign. Gay rights were pioneered by the riots in 1969 outside New York's Stonewall Inn. In the late 1990s in Australia, students and workers stopped the Jabiluka uranium mine project going ahead. None of these campaigns were polite and respectable. They involved confrontations with the police, boycotts, stopping traffic and disrupting business as usual. And they won.

The disruption and inconvenience caused by protest is nothing compared to that already being caused by climate change, and which will only intensify as the planet continues to heat. Coco was berated for letting “entire cities suffer” but that’s exactly what the system is setting us on track for. Think Sydney choking on smoke in early 2020. Think Islamabad drowning from the unprecedented monsoon floods while malaria spreads within climate refugee camps of millions. Think eight workers dying in an Amazon fulfillment centre in December 2021 because management refused to let them evacuate as a tornado hurtled through Illinois. Think of the 18,000 displaced in Australia during the 2019 bushfires, with many survivors still languishing in tents and other temporary accommodation. Where is the official concern about their inconvenience?

Meanwhile, fossil fuel companies continue to make huge profits. There are no consequences for those profiting from environmentally damaging industries. Instead, they are rewarded with generous government handouts, while laws are changed and approvals given to ensure destructive new projects can go ahead, like the Adani coal mine in Queensland or the Scarborough gas project in Western Australia, and that any resistance to them is criminalised. And it’s not just the Liberal government in NSW—the Victorian Labor government has passed similar laws to criminalise environmental protest.

To stop climate change and save the planet, the way society is organised will need to be upended. Polite protesting that has no tangible impact simply will not cut it. Roads will need to be blocked; business as usual will have to be disrupted. Anti-protest laws will need to be broken. Violet Coco must be freed, and charges dropped against other activists. We need to fight not only to repeal anti-protest laws, but to win genuine environmental justice before it is too late.

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P.S.

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<https://redflag.org.au/article/inconvenience-now-major-crime-nsw>