

## Protecting the Merchants of Death: The Australian Police Effort for Land Forces 2024

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Theme: [Defence](#)

*September 11. Melbourne. The scene: the area between Spencer Street Bridge and the Batman Park-Spencer Street tram stop. Heavily armed police, with glinting face coverings and shields, had seized and blocked the bridge over the course of the morning, preventing all traffic from transiting through it. Behind them stood second tier personnel, lightly armed. Then, barricades, followed by horse mounted police. Holding up the rear: two fire trucks.*

In the skies, unmanned drones hovered like black, stationary ravens of menace. But these were not deemed sufficient by Victoria Police. Helicopters kept them company. Surveillance cameras also stood prominently to the north end of the bridge.

Before this assortment of marshalled force was an eclectic gathering of individuals from keffiyeh-swaddled pro-Palestinian activists to drummers kitted out in the Palestinian colours, and any number of theatrical types dressed in the shades and costumery of death. At one point, a chilling Joker figure [made an appearance](#), his outfit and suitcase covered in mock blood. The share stock of chants was readily deployed: “No justice, no peace, no racist police”; “We, the people, will not be silenced. Stop the bombing now, now, now”. Innumerable placards condemning the arms industry and Israel’s war on Gaza also make their appearance.

The purpose of this vast, costly exercise proved elementary and brutal: to defend [Land Forces 2024](#), one of the largest arms fairs in the southern hemisphere, from Disrupt Land Forces, a collective demonised by the Victorian state government as the great unwashed, polluted rebel rousers and anarchists. Much had been made of the potential size of the gathering, with uncritical journalists consuming gobbets of information from police sources keen to justify an operation deemed the largest since the 2000 World Economic Forum. Police officers from regional centres in the state had been called up, and while Chief Commissioner Shane Patton proved tight-lipped on the exact number, an estimate exceeding 1,000 was not refuted. The total cost of the effort: [somewhere](#) between A\$10 to A\$15 million.

It all began as a healthy gathering at the dawn of day, with [protestors moving](#) to the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre to picket entry points for those attending Land Forces.

Over time, there was movement between the various entrances to prevent these modern merchants from spruiking their merchandise and touting for offers. As Green Left Online

[noted](#), “The Victorian Police barricaded the entrance of the Melbourne Convention Centre so protestors marched to the back entrance to disrupt Land Forces whilst attendees are going through security checks.”

In keeping with a variant of Anton Chekhov’s principle, if a loaded gun is placed upon the stage, it is bound to be used. Otherwise, leave it out of the script. A large police presence would hardly be worthwhile without a few cracked skulls, flesh wounds or arrests. Scuffles accordingly [broke out](#) with banal predictability. The mounted personnel were also [brought out](#) to add a snap of hostility and intimidation to the protestors as they sought to hamper access to the Convention. For all of this, it was the police who left complaining, worried about their safety.

Then came the broader push from the officers to create a zone of exclusion around the building, resulting in the closure of Clarendon Street to the south, up to Batman Park. Efforts were made to [push the protests](#) from the convention centre across the bridge towards the park. This was in keeping with the promise by the Chief Commissioner that the MCEC site and its surrounds [would be deemed a designated area](#) over the duration of the arms fair from September 11 to 13.

Such designated areas, enabled by the passage of a 2009 law, vests the police with powers to stop and search a person within the zone without a warrant. Anything perceived to be a weapon can be seized, with officers having powers to request that civilians reveal their identity.

Despite such exercisable powers, the relevant legislation [imposes a time limit](#) of 12 hours for such areas, something most conspicuously breached by the Commissioner. But as Melbourne Activist Legal Support (MALS) group [remarks](#), the broader criteria outlined in the legislative regime are often not met and constitute a “method of protest control” that impairs “the rights to assembly, association, and political expression” protected by the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

The Victorian government had little time for the language of protest. In a stunningly grotesque twist, the Victorian Premier, Jacinta Allan, [defended](#) those at the Land Forces conference as legitimate representatives of business engaging in a peaceful enterprise. “Any industry deserves the right to have these sorts of events in a peaceful and respectful way.” If the manufacture, sale and distribution of weapons constitutes a “peaceful and respectful” pursuit, we have disappeared down the rabbit hole with Alice at great speed.

That theme continued with efforts by both Allan and the opposition leader, John Pesutto, to tarnish the efforts by fellow politicians to attend the protest. Both fumed indignantly at the efforts of Greens MP Gabrielle de Vietri to participate, with the premier calling the measure one designed for “divisive political purposes.” The Green MP had a pertinent [response](#): “The community has spoken loud and clear, they don’t want weapons and war profiting to come to our doorstep, and the Victorian Labor government is sponsoring this.”

The absurd, morally inverted spectacle was duly affirmed: a taxpayer funded arms exposition, defended by the taxpayer funded police, used to repel the tax paying protestors keen to promote peace in the face of an industry that thrives on death, mutilation and misery.

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