

The Year the Cops Were Kicked Out of Trans Day of Remembrance

Black Flag Sydney

In 2019, a major shift occurred in Sydney in its annual marking of Trans Day of Remembrance, a day which observes the lives lost to transphobia around the world. For years, a vigil had taken place in Harmony Park, organised by the Gender Centre. Not only was the vigil held right by the Surry Hills Police Station, but police officers would even attend in uniform, co-host the vigil, and be given a spot to speak at the event.

This had been an obvious sign of hypocrisy and a disgusting example of pinkwashing the police force, which was felt throughout the entire trans community. It was still in recent memory for many members of the community that Veronica Baxter had died in custody, a brutal killing of yet another Aboriginal life, and that the people who picked her up in the first place were from the Surry Hills Police Station itself, the station now chosen to put the Trans Day of Remembrance Vigil alongside.

It was not without its share of controversy and grassroots protest before 2019. Small collectives of trans activists would in some years, crash the vigil with protest banners. In 2016, several militant trans activists stood with banners at the vigil behind a cop who was given speaking spot, which messages such as ‘Cops don’t make us safe’, ‘No pride in genocidal institutions’, and “1788 – 1978 – 2016”,¹ drawing links between the Police Force’s colonial violence and violence against the LGBT community. Despite this clear political tension and injustice, the Gender Centre for years would continue to invite the police to attend the vigil.

In 2019, however, the political ground significantly changed. This was due to two organisations making the decision to hold vigils on the day, splitting from the traditional Gender Centre one, on the basis of explicitly providing a space for observing the day without the cops’ presence. One was Trans Pride Australia, a group which devotes itself mostly to social gatherings of the trans community and hosting other events for the benefit of the community. The other was Trans Action Warrang, a collective with a direct protest and political focus, which earlier in the year had hosted a protest march on the day of Trans Day of Visibility, with a crowd of people about a thousand strong. It was one of the first protest marches in Sydney, post-Marriage Equality, that specifically called for political change around transgender rights.

¹ 1788 was the year of the First Fleet and the beginning of the genocide of Aboriginal people, 1978 was the year of the Mardi Gras riot, and 2016 was the year of the protest.

2019 proved to be tumultuous for the trans community in NSW. Earlier in the year, it was shocked by the news that Mhelody Bruno had been brutally murdered in Wagga Wagga. Mhelody was a Filipina migrant coming to Australia to look for work, a beauty pageant queen who worked at a call centre to provide money for her family. Only a few months before Trans Day of Remembrance, Mhelody had been murdered by Rian Ross Toyer, a former corporal in the Royal Australian Air Force. Along with Filipino grassroots organisations like Anakbayan, Migrante, and other independent members of the trans and Filipino community, Trans Action Warrang had supported those organisations in a vigil for Mhelody. It was charged with both grief and anger over the transphobia and racism that led to Mhelody's death, the same that ended Veronica Baxter's life around 15 years earlier.

The anti-cop vigils were well attended, with the Trans Action Warrang vigil in Newtown being the largest of a few hundred people, while the pro-cop Gender Centre vigil was barely attended. Speakers who made explicitly anti-cop messages to the crowd were met with thunderous applause. The vigil concluded with a list of all those who had died from systemic violence in the year around the world. The list took almost 20 minutes to read out in full. Mhelody Bruno's name was there.

The public pressure proved too much for the Gender Centre. Promptly a year later, the Police were not invited as partners, speakers, or collaborators for the vigil which took place online (although, bizarrely, they were fine with the corporation Amazon sponsoring). The role of the Trans Action Warrang and Trans Pride Australia vigils proving their message that police aren't welcome was more representative of the community played a part, as no doubt did the Black Lives Matter marches of 2020. They have never been invited back to the event.

Today, the marches for Trans Day of Remembrance are titled Trans Day of Resistance and take place during the day on the closest weekend to November 20th, hosted by Pride in Protest. Vigils also take place hosted by different organisations, including the Gender Centre, on the day. Trans Day of Visibility is also marked with a trans rights march, with 2019 cementing in actions on both days every year. Today, those two events continue to have hundreds attending, explicitly marching to defund the police and for other trans rights issues.

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<https://blackflagsydney.com/the-year-the-cops-were-kicked-out-of-trans-day-of-remembrance/>
Pride in Protest is a popular/mass organisation formed by queer militants of Black Flag Sydney together with community activists to:

1. Fight pinkwashing and queerphobia in “Australian” society
2. Turn the Sydney Mardi Gras into a radically democratic working class protest movement.

<https://prideinprotest.medium.com/>

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