

'Tens of thousands' to join Australia Day activist WAR



Indigenous activist Tarneen Onus-Williams in Melbourne's Carlton.

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- Pia Akerman

Indigenous activists calling for the abolition of Australia Day expect tens of thousands of protesters to swamp Melbourne's CBD next week, saying a groundswell of support is building for more drastic action than changing the date of the national holiday.

Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) — which refuses to engage with police or Melbourne City Council to co-ordinate the "Invasion Day" rally — anticipate a protest larger than last year, which drowned out the city's official Australia Day parade, encouraged by vocal support from some Melbourne councils.

Organiser Tarneen Onus-Williams said the "change the date" campaign to switch Australia Day from January 26 had overshadowed ongoing issues relating to Aborigines and risked becoming a token gesture akin to Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations.

"People think just change the date and it's going to be fine," said Ms Onus-Williams, who identifies as a Yigar Gunditjmara and Bindal woman.

"People say they're celebrating a great country. Celebrating a great country — Australia — has come at a loss for so many people, especially Aboriginal people.

“Most people who think this is a great country are white people.”

Ms Onus-Williams said last year’s decision by Yarra, Darebin and Moreland councils in Melbourne’s inner-northern suburbs to drop Australia Day celebrations was a significant sign of solidarity.

Yarra and Darebin councils were consequently stripped of their ability to hold citizenship ceremonies, while Moreland council received a warning from the federal government.

Councils in Fremantle and Hobart have also expressed support for changing the date of Australia Day. Other rallies condemning Australia Day — smaller than the Melbourne event — will be held in other capital cities on Friday week.

Fellow WAR organiser Arika Waulu said the group made a conscious decision not to consult police or Melbourne City Council about the upcoming rally, which last year drew between 10,000 and 50,000 people, according to varying estimates, blocking traffic as protesters staged a sit-in.

“As sovereign people we don’t seek authority to walk on our own land,” she said. “We want it (Australia Day) to be abolished until there’s something to celebrate. It’s never going to be OK to celebrate it on any other day.”

A City of Melbourne spokesman said peaceful protests of a political or religious nature were allowed under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights, though roads could be closed only by council, police or VicRoads.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale will join the rally as it leaves Parliament House, as will Greens MP Lidia Thorpe, who has called for Australian and Aboriginal flags on government buildings to fly at half-mast that day.

Ms Waulu said the group had received threats from some far-right groups.

Nationalist groups True Blue Crew and the United Patriots Front are organising a beach party at the St Kilda foreshore on Australia Day, prompting Port Phillip Mayor Bernadene Voss to yesterday warn that alcohol consumption and rowdy behaviour would not be tolerated.

Ms Voss said the council did not issue permits for events on Australia Day because it wanted the beach and other public areas to be accessible to everyone.

The beach was trashed by 5000 drunken revellers on Christmas Day last year.