

Labor government boosts police powers

Sydney shooting sparks witchhunt against youth

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The Labor Party government and the mass media in the Australian state of New South Wales are utilising a November 1 incident, where gunshots were fired at the Lakemba police station in Sydney's southwestern working class suburbs, to whip up anti-immigrant sentiments and introduce sweeping new police powers.

Without any evidence, the state's Labor Premier Bob Carr openly stated what the media coverage implied--that the shooting was carried out by a 'gang' of youth from the local Lebanese community. He immediately foreshadowed laws to give police the power to cordon off entire districts with roadblocks and stop and search vehicles.

Responding directly to demands issued by Police Commissioner Peter Ryan, the Labor leaders will rush legislation into parliament this week authorising any police officer to set up a road block for six hours, or longer with approval from a commissioned officer. Police will be able to halt all vehicles and demand ID checks of drivers and passengers--a power currently confined to drivers allegedly breaching traffic rules. Failure to comply will carry a \$5,000 fine or 12 months' jail.

Premier Carr also swiftly granted police requests for bullet-proof vests. This is in line with Ryan's depiction of parts of Sydney as similar to Northern Ireland, long under military occupation. The *Daily Telegraph*, Rupert Murdoch's tabloid newspaper in Sydney, ran a front-page headline declaring the incident 'An Act of War'. Its editorial labelled the shooting a 'guerilla attack' and the perpetrators as 'terrorists'.

The media has deliberately focussed on the Arabic descent of many youth in Sydney's southwest, in attempts to link the shooting to international terrorism and Islamic extremism. The *Telegraph* referred to 'dangerous ethnically based gangs'.

A state election, due for March, is looming as a law-and-order contest between Labor and the conservative parties, with each promising more draconian and repressive laws directed against youth and crime, with far-reaching implications for basic democratic rights.

The Liberal Party opposition has called for the right to bail to be eliminated for people charged with violent crimes. It has pledged to empower police to demand identification details at any time and to compel citizens gathered in public to leave on

police instruction. The Liberals have supported demands for police to be armed with capsicum gas spray and extendable batons.

The incident at the Lakemba police station took place in the context of rising tensions in the southwestern suburbs following the October 17 killing of 14-year-old Edward Lee, who was stabbed, apparently in a fight involving a number of youth. The media, citing police reports, referred to his suspected assailant as being of 'Middle Eastern appearance'.

Under the pretext of investigating Lee's tragic death, police carried out a campaign of harassment and provocation in the area, raiding homes and canvassing streets repeatedly. Lurid media charges of open drug-dealing in the neighbourhood were followed by police allegations that youth of Arabic origin were refusing to name the culprit.

In a show of strength just three days before the police station shooting, 130 officers conducted an 18-hour blitz in nearby Bankstown, cordoning off a major shopping mall and searching people at random. Police said they arrested 24 people and laid 71 charges, primarily for possessing knives or drugs. Many passers-by were stunned by the operation.

A local Arabic community leader, Khali Chami of the Lakemba Islamic Welfare Centre, said 'police were unjustifiably stopping and searching anyone of Middle-Eastern appearance'.

The operation utilised laws recently passed by the Labor government outlawing the possession of knives and authorising police to search anyone 'suspected' of carrying a knife.

In the aftermath of the police station shooting, representatives of local organisations objected to the media and official stereotyping of the Lebanese community as a nestbed of youth criminals. Some suggested that the problems among young people had their sources in the prevailing social conditions of unemployment and poverty, rather than ethnic origins.

This brought a much-publicised rebuke from Premier Carr.

'Unemployment is not a justification for taking an automatic weapon and shooting at police, that's not on,' he told a media conference. 'You're dealing here in any case with a gang that is fully employed; fully employed in criminal behaviour.' He referred to organised drug-running and car theft.

Carr went on to declare that 'the people [the Lebanese gang]

trying to destroy the Australian way of life will simply not succeed'.

But even if the police station shooting were the work of a criminal gang, how could the involvement of youth in serious crime--such as drugs and car theft--be divorced from the underlying social conditions? If young people had access to first-class education and social facilities and could aspire to decent well-paying employment, would they be drawn into such activity?

Carr's remarks beg a further question: if it is not the social conditions they face that have led a layer of youth into criminal and anti-social activity, where do the causes lie? The implication is that crime is the product of the character or genetic makeup of the individuals who carry it out--or in this case an entire section of the Lebanese community.

Carr blurted out the position of a ruling elite that has increasingly repudiated the entire notion that the key to overcoming social ills lies in improving the conditions of life. A return is being made to a social policy based on the medieval outlook that categorised peoples' actions according to moral concepts of good and evil. Criminals commit crime because ... they are criminals. People do evil things because ... they are born evil.

This racial scapegoating serves a definite purpose. It is to block any serious examination of the social disaster confronting many working class youth and to divert attention away from those responsible--including Carr's government itself.

Southwest Sydney is beset by poverty and deprivation. Average real incomes in the area have plunged 10 percent in the last decade. It was once an industrial area, but numerous factories have closed or restructured. Full-time employment has been steadily replaced with temporary contracts or part-time working.

Moreover, the gulf between such working class regions and the affluent neighbourhoods has become ever more stark. Sydney, like most major cities around the world, has become acutely divided along social lines. Average incomes in Sydney's elite eastern suburbs and on the North Shore of Sydney Harbour--labelled 'Global Sydney'--are now more than twice those of the Lakemba-Bankstown area and the rest of working class Sydney--classified as 'Industrial Sydney'.

Governments, both national and state, have intensified these underlying economic processes. They have slashed funding for welfare, health, education and community facilities. Low-cost housing areas like the southwest, which draw recent immigrants, are suffering the consequences of the abolition of welfare payments and social services for new arrivals for their first two years. Reports are surfacing of entire families suffering from malnutrition.

Youth unemployment averages 30 percent in the Bankstown region, where a large proportion of the population is aged 12-24. A generation is growing up with limited prospects, scarce jobs and little money. Few recreational or sporting

activities are available, except those that are beyond their financial reach. Immense wealth is paraded before their eyes every day--expensive cars, mansions and entertainment--yet they are denied access to it

The sight of young people sitting around parks, railway stations or shopping centres, obviously with nothing to do, is a universal one. Shopping mall managements have a policy of evicting teenagers. Youth are frustrated, bitter or just bored. There has been a predictable increase in reports of petty crimes and social ills like drug abuse and fighting.

Having helped create these conditions, governments at all levels have responded to this social malaise by punitive and repressive measures, including curtailing the rights of youth to congregate in public.

The Carr Labor government has given the lead. A centrepiece of Labor's 1995 election campaign was Carr's remark that any young person who wore a baseball cap backwards was a 'gang member'. Upon taking office the Labor leaders boosted police numbers by at least 500 and increased foot patrols. Last year they introduced the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act*, which allows police to detain minors under 18 without charges for up to 24 hours and to implement curfews in declared areas. This law also makes parents liable for the conduct of their children, as if they are to blame for the state of society.

The Labor-controlled southwest Sydney local councils of Canterbury and Bankstown have provided further grounds for police to harass youth by resurrecting long defunct 'Loitering' laws. They have erected 'No Loitering' signs at virtually every railway station and in most public places. With nowhere else to go, youth have continued to gather, leading to increased confrontations with, and mounting hostility toward, the police.

Behind the official offensive against youth are profound tendencies within the economy and society. In order to attract investment to their shores and maintain corporate profitability, governments worldwide are presiding over unprecedented levels of inequality and misery. Incapable of taking measures to alleviate the resulting social blight, they have only one course left to them--increased state repression, including sweeping police powers and the abolition of long-held civil liberties.

See Also:

Labor governments push debate about naming juveniles facing criminal charges

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