

Massive police presence at Sydney anti-NATO rally

James Conachy
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Up to 5,000 people, largely from Sydney's Serbian and Greek communities, last Sunday demonstrated their solidarity with the people of Yugoslavia against the US-NATO aggression. In the second large rally held in Sydney since the war began, protestors wore targets on their back, emulating the actions of citizens in Belgrade and other cities. Banners and signs compared NATO's war with the invasion of the Balkans by Nazi Germany in 1941.

The rally was met by one of the largest police mobilisations in the state of New South Wales since the mass demonstrations against the Vietnam war. As people arrived in the park, they found it ringed by over 500 police, reportedly under the personal supervision of Police Commissioner Peter Ryan. Police stopped demonstrators and searched their bags as they left nearby railway stations and bus stops.

Plain-clothes officers were scattered throughout the assembly. Specialised mounted and riot units were stationed on adjoining roads. Police videotaped the entire event, recording as many faces as possible. Altogether, the state Labor government mobilised some 950 police, including units at the US Consulate, several blocks away.

Since the earlier demonstration on March 28, when clashes took place between young demonstrators and police at the entrance to the US consulate, a concerted campaign has been conducted throughout the media to stereotype the Serbian community as violent and anti-social. The coverage has ignored the legitimate and passionate concerns of people for their families and relatives living under the constant threat of bombing by US warplanes, and for the implications of a Balkan war.

In this climate, police used video footage of the first demonstration to track down and arrest a young man who scaled a flagpole outside the US Consulate and pulled down the American flag. Other youth have reportedly been arrested for minor damage.

The organisers of last Sunday's demonstration, the Serbian National Federation, adapted to the media campaign by denouncing the actions of young Serbs as criminal and

pledging to work with the police in controlling future rallies.

Despite the resulting police intimidation, people assembled for over three hours to listen to speeches and to denounce the indiscriminate bombing underway against civilian targets and industrial facilities. A 14-year-old girl, Dusanka Radan, made a passionate plea for ethnic harmony and an end to the suffering in the Balkans.

Other speeches, however, promoted extreme right-wing notions, alleging that the attack on Yugoslavia was connected to a world Jewish conspiracy. Ilija Glisic, the head of the Serbian National Federation, was quoted in the press as saying that the same forces who crucified Jesus were now crucifying the Serbian people. A man named Jack King was allowed to speak uninterrupted from the platform, declaring that Madeleine Albright's Jewish background was proof that Jews were behind the attack on Yugoslavia.

A delegation of members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed thousands of WSWs statements in both English and Serbo-Croatian, opposing the US-NATO assault from a socialist standpoint.

Some people took multiple copies to distribute at their workplaces and schools, and discussions developed on how to take forward opposition to the war.

After an hour, Serbian National Federation stewards surrounded a group of SEP members. They demanded that the campaigners leave the rally, on the grounds that they "were not Serbs". One official denounced a Serbo-Croatian translation of the WSWs article "Behind and beyond the propaganda--Why is the US bombing Serbia?" as "anti-Serb" because it was printed in the Roman alphabet also used in Croatia.

When SEP members defended their democratic right to be present at a political assembly, Serbian National Federation officials called over a squad of police, who physically escorted the SEP members to the edge of the park.

When SEP members refused to comply with demands to provide police with their names and addresses, they were threatened with arrest on charges of "incitement" if they returned to the rally. Police combined with Federation

officials to search for, and remove under threat of arrest, SEP members and supporters on the other side of the crowd.

These actions were designed to sow confusion and misrepresent the SEP as supporting the NATO bombing. The SEP has written to both the Police Commissioner and the Serbian National Federation to protest against this blatant infringement of basic democratic rights.

SEP members continued to distribute leaflets and speak with people as they entered and left the park. WSWs correspondents interviewed some who attended the rally. They spoke with disgust about the NATO bombing and the role of the Western media.

Branko Grkovic, an engineer formerly from Kosovo, said, "I come from Orehovac in Kosovo but I have lived in Australia for the last nine years. I have many friends and family in Orehovac, which has a population of 25,000 and about 45,000 in the surrounding area. The city is 75 percent Albanian and there are many villages around the city with Serbian and Albanian populations.

"I have contacted one of my sisters there and she told me that one bomb had been dropped in the town. The NATO bombing has shocked us and I am worried about my family--I have three sisters, three brothers, mother and many cousins. We are concerned and afraid about what will happen to our family.

"Clinton says the bombing is to stop ethnic cleansing, but I don't think ethnic cleansing started just now. My sister told me that most of the Albanian refugees are connected with KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] or have been forced to leave because this is what the KLA wants. The KLA have had snipers in the cities and towns. This is not like fighting on the ground.

"Maybe NATO troops will invade Kosovo. If they do, or try to go further into Serbia, this will create big problems with Russia and even the possibility of a European-wide or Third World War. I don't think NATO or the US has any economic interests in Kosovo but it seems the US wants to show the world their almighty power.

"Americans, Australians, Western Europeans are living very well, they have no reason to start a world war, but in Russia there are big problems, they are living in poverty, they are desperate. Maybe something happens and nuclear weapons start to be used. This would be a disaster for the entire world.

"The main issue in this war is that people should know the truth--this is the most important thing. What the Americans do with CNN is terrible--everyday the same lies, the same things--this is brainwashing. Australians or Western European are working hard and sleeping and don't seem to have the time to study these issues in depth. This is a problem because people have to listen to both sides."

Vladimir Stojakovic, a classical musician, now employed as a social worker with disabled children, immigrated to Australia two years ago. He said:

"The US has violated a number of international laws. The Rambouillet agreement is against the law and no country, not just Serbia, could agree with the demands made in this agreement. It was designed to separate Serbia from Kosovo--this was its only goal.

"I have demonstrated many times against Milosevic in the past, but this war is not about Milosevic it is about the rights of our country. The US and NATO are just using Milosevic. Before, when we demonstrated against him, they would support him, now they are using him as an excuse to bomb us.

"It seems to me that this is going to lead to another world order, one based in Washington. The US seems to want to control all the world with no other power able to confront the US and NATO. The whole world is now being destabilised--look at the situation in Russia and China.

"The people in the US are sitting safe and protected in their homes but they don't know what is happening. Their armies are working all around the world trying to destabilise many countries, not just Yugoslavia. I met some people from Turkey and they told me that the US is working to destabilise the situation there.

"People who are just watching CNN would not have a clue about what is going on, but NATO is bombing water supplies and electricity generating plants--these are not military targets. These places are bombed when an army is attempting to destroy a country and make it weak.

"Although Germany, France and Britain are involved, General Wesley Clarke seems to have taken over all of NATO decisions. He decides everything with American officers giving all the orders. The situation is very complicated and there is much speculation, but what I do know is that this is against all the basic rules of international law."



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