

Security preparations in Australia for upcoming World Economic Forum

Chris Sinnema
31 August 2000

Extensive security measures are being put in place by the Australian federal and Victorian state governments in preparation for protests being planned at the Asia Pacific Summit of the World Economic Forum (WEF), being held September 11-13 at Melbourne's Crown Casino complex.

In the lead-up to the demonstrations the media, backed by politicians from both the major parties, are attempting to legitimise the use of police violence. Press reports have claimed that “extremists and anarchists from the United States and Britain” are planning to join the demonstration.

The recent protests outside the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle and against the IMF and World Bank meetings in Washington have been a focus of widespread distortion in the Australian media, with reports falsely accusing demonstrators of initiating riots and provoking police reprisals by smashing shop windows and looting.

Media hostility has also focussed on plans by high school youth to attend the three days of protests, with tabloid headlines claiming ‘radicals lure kids’. Prime Minister John Howard condemned rally leaders as un-Australian and Victorian Labor Premier Steve Bracks declared the protest groups had no support among the Victorian public and were therefore trying to “arc it up by having one-off violence”.

In a further blatant attempt to intimidate protesters, especially young people, the *Sunday Age* ran a prominent article on August 27 claiming that police are “concerned” that “teenage demonstrators might be forced into packed cells that are not monitored by video cameras”. The newspaper alleged that “antiquated” police cells will be used to hold demonstrators and warned the three days of demonstrations will push the state's detention system to “crisis point”.

Protesters in the umbrella group known as S-11, which includes middle class radical organisations, environmentalists, student and church groups and trade unions, estimate at least 10,000 people will protest at the social and environmental destruction caused by transnational corporations. The group aims to shut down the WEF Summit by forming a human chain to prevent delegates from entering.

The World Economic Forum, formed in 1987, meets annually to discuss trade and business issues. It is a leading think-tank for global capitalism, comprised of more than 1,000 leading transnational corporations, academics, trade ministers and heads of state.

Police action in Seattle last November caused outrage internationally, when an overwhelmingly peaceful demonstration became the scene of concerted police violence. Over 500 demonstrators were arrested when more than 1,300 city police, joined by King County Sheriff's deputies, hundreds of state troopers and 200 national guardsmen, enforced a state of civil emergency.

Police in full riot gear used tear gas and capsicum spray against peaceful demonstrators. Concussion grenades, beanbag and rubber bullets, and paintball were used to clear protesters who had locked arms to stop delegates' access to the meeting.

Arrested demonstrators were rounded up and bussed to a disused naval station converted to a booking station and jail. At the recent IMF and World Bank meetings held in Washington this April 600 people were arrested with police using batons and pepper spray against demonstrators.

Mass arrests and brutality against protesters is being established as normal procedure in the United States. Earlier this month 450 people were arrested for protesting outside the Republican Party's national

convention. Legal representatives for those detained cited against the police 188 counts of excessive force, 15 counts of sexual abuse, 67 counts of denial of medical needs and 25 counts of mental abuse.

While the Victorian police are keeping the exact details of their plans under wraps, the fact that senior state police have been in discussion with Seattle officials over tactics for the demonstration gives a forewarning of what is being prepared.

At the same time the federal government is bringing forward plans to give sweeping new powers to allow military intervention in civil disturbances, with legislation being rushed through the Senate prior to the start of the WEF and the Sydney Olympic Games.

The Protective Services Intelligence Group—responsible for surveillance of political opponents—has been preparing for the WEF protests for the past six months.

While demonstrators aim to block delegates from entering the Summit venue at Crown Towers, media reports have made clear that police will herd demonstrators into areas far from the casino, onto the opposite side of Melbourne's Yarra River. According to the S-11 website, "Protestors will be penned into designated areas north of the Yarra 'miles' from the conference centre".

Victorian Police Superintendent Peter Haloran, who is in charge of operations on the day, warned rally participants in no uncertain terms: "If they go ahead with threats to shut the forum down then we will take appropriate steps to ensure people can go about their business without intimidation by a group of people seeking to impose their will on the community".

The Police Association has demanded that its members be issued with riot shields, shin pads and helmets after claiming to have knowledge that some protesters were planning to throw balloons filled with urine and rocks during the protest. S-11 protest organisers have stated repeatedly that the protests will be non-violent.

Fourteen hundred police are set to be on duty during the protest and all leave has been cancelled, ensuring an extra 2,500 will be on hand. According to one report hundreds of police have been secretly training in riot control techniques at a secluded warehouse situated in the city's inner west.

The state's 100-strong riot-police, the Force Response

Unit, will be on constant stand-by close to the protest venue. In 1993 the actions of this unit evoked outrage nationally when it conducted a military-style baton charge against students, teachers and parents who were picketing to stop the closure of Richmond Secondary College in Melbourne's inner-city. At least 20 protesters were injured, two seriously, after being penned into an enclosed area.

Recent joint police-military exercises have been conducted in preparation for the WEF demonstration and Olympic games. Earlier in the year Victorian Police held an "anti-terrorist" exercise at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, the city's largest sporting venue, where a car was blown up. On August 20, 500 reservists from the army's 4th brigade were involved in another bomb detection exercise at a soccer stadium in Epping, a northern suburb of Melbourne.

In May the Bracks government substantially boosted funding to the police by \$46 million. Of this, \$2.5 million was allocated to security for major events including the WEF.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact