

Commando-style police raid in Sydney designed to intimidate youth

Erika Zimmer
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At 11.30 on the night of Saturday February 10, eighty heavily armed police staged a commando-style raid on an Internet café and pool hall in Sydney's busiest cinema and entertainment district. It was one of the largest and most aggressive police raids ever carried out in the city.

In an operation designed to stun and terrorise, police blasted their way into the building with explosive charges. Instead of using the buildings' lifts, around 20 officers, armed with shields and assault weapons, blew open three fire-doors with "cutting-charges," then used three explosive devices—described by police as "flashbang" devices—to further disorient anyone on the premises.

Five of the café's occupants were so terrified that they smashed through windows and onto a street awning to escape. They were quickly surrounded by police and arrested. Two were treated by ambulance officers for cuts.

An eyewitness told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that the five, mostly young Korean students and tourists, were then beaten up by police before being taken into custody. After being interrogated all night, the five were released mid-morning without being charged or receiving any official explanation.

An entire section of George Street, one of Sydney's main thoroughfares, between Goulburn and Bathurst Streets, was sealed off to prevent public access during the raid. Occupants of passing vehicles were moved on, ordered to keep their eyes straight ahead and not watch the police action. Police forced restaurant patrons to leave immediately. Others were locked in for the duration of the operation.

One café employee told the *WSWS* that he had never seen anything like it. "I thought it was a hostage situation." A young worker at Timezone, an amusement parlor across the street, said she thought someone was making a movie. "I have never seen things like that. Flashes and shooting. People were frightened."

In an attempt to justify the raid, police claimed to have

received information that a fight between rival Asian gangs was timed to take place that night. New South Wales Assistant Police Commissioner Dick Adams said assault squads from the elite State Protection Group had been used because "the information we had was that they could well have been armed." Other police sources claimed the operation had prevented a "bloodbath" or "even a massacre".

The owners of both the Internet café and a Karaoke Bar on the floor above expressed anger and disbelief over the police claims. The café owner's 30-year-old daughter told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "We've had the business for six years, our customers are Korean students and tourists and other Asians. But we've never had any trouble with gangs. We don't know any gang members. This is unbelievable. I'm so angry."

Her 60-year-old mother collapsed during the raid and had to be taken to hospital by ambulance. "She's too terrified to even leave home," her daughter said. "My mum's worked hard all her life. She's a law abiding citizen."

Kwang Bae Chung, owner of the Korean Karaoke Bar, told the newspaper: "We've been open only two weeks. All our patrons are Korean students. What gangs?" Speaking to the *WSWS* through an interpreter, Chung said police had used explosives to blow open the fire door on his premises.

"The police pushed the door open and came in with shields to protect themselves from the explosives. There were about 18 of them. It was the weekend, so there were many people. It was really full. The police turned off the air conditioner and made the customers sit on the floor in the foyer. There was a guy vomiting but they wouldn't let it be cleaned up. They were told to sit without moving. If they tried to talk, the police shouted at them.

"The police switched off all the mobile phones. They searched the customers and checked their ID and

photographed them. It took about two hours. The police searched every single thing, like under the sofa. When they left they just said, 'Sorry about the door'. The police didn't have permission to come in. We're so upset about that. They didn't have a search warrant."

A number of eyewitnesses told the WSWs that the media must have known about the raid beforehand, throwing further doubt on police claims to be forestalling a gang war. Rupert Murdoch's tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, was immediately on the spot, publishing a lurid account of the raid, including a half-page colour photograph showing a State Protection Group officer with his gun trained on one of the youth on the awning. An employee working in a bar across the road told the WSWs that a police forensic photographer had set up his camera on the building's second floor to record the raid.

While police sources claimed that "up to 16 members of an Asian gang, one of whom was carrying a collection of firearms, knives and other weapons, were seen milling outside the George Street premises just minutes before the raid," not one of these "gang members" was apprehended. Nor were any weapons found in the operation.

Despite the raid's failure to produce any evidence of gang activity, media outlets, including the *Sydney Morning Herald*, have joined police in describing the operation as a "pre-emptive strike" and a "show of strength" designed to drive Asian youth gangs from the area. The coverage serves to reinforce the raid's blunt message to young people who gather in the city for entertainment, particularly Asian youth. The media, police and state government are seeking to intimidate and demonise them, depict them as violent troublemakers and force them out of the city.

The area around the south-western end of George Street, long a venue for young moviegoers and pinball players, is being revamped as a more up-market area for well-heeled tourists and wealthy inner-city residents. Police installed closed-circuit television cameras throughout the area three years ago in "Operation Safe City". The violent raid was designed to further assure local business owners that their interests would be protected by a stepped-up police presence.

The operation is part of a wider "law and order" campaign being conducted by the police and the state Labor government. During the last state election in 1999, the Labor Party's main slogan was "Tough Times Requires Tough Action". Its election advertisements featured police searching youth on the streets and Premier

Bob Carr walking through well-guarded railway stations and streets at night, boasting of Labor's record in boosting police numbers. Carr promised a total of 2,110 extra police on the streets, including a 400-strong "flying squad" to target crime "hot spots".

On the same weekend as the George Street raid, organisers of a three-day music festival at Appin, in Sydney's south-west, condemned police for heavy-handed tactics. Promoters said they had agreed and paid for police to attend the event to deter illegal drug-taking, but 30 police, backed by three drug detection dogs and security guards, frisked patrons as they entered and used surveillance cameras in the grounds, making 78 arrests. Promoters later cancelled future festivals.

Two days later, on February 13, 100 police conducted a blitz on "drug-related crime" in Cabramatta, one of Sydney's main Asian centres, launching what they described as an on-going operation to combat crime throughout the western suburbs. Police indiscriminately stopped and searched young people on the streets, arresting 17 on charges relating to drugs and property offences.

Regional police commander Clive Small described the operation as the "first wave" of a long-prepared "seven point action plan" to crack down on street crime. It was "sending a clear message that the police and community ... do not want these types of activities occurring in their streets". Nearly 100 people were arrested in Cabramatta and other suburbs such as Blacktown, Liverpool and Green Valley during the first three days of the operation. Sydney's western suburbs register some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the state, even higher than the appalling national average of 23 percent.



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