

Unprecedented police raid on nightclubs in Australia's largest city

Richard Phillips
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On the pretext of combatting drug trafficking, police in the Australian state of New South Wales carried out a massive raid on inner-city Sydney nightclubs in the early hours of October 21. More than 2,000 patrons at five venues were detained for up to two hours while some 300 police officers using 30 sniffer dogs identified suspects, searched them and arrested those found to have illegal drugs.

One club owner condemned the police methods as “storm trooper tactics”. Police blocked off the streets outside the clubs, sealed the entrances and marched inside. The DJs were ordered to stop the music and turn on the lights so that all the patrons could be processed. Some people were dragged outside where they were subjected to degrading strip searches in the street. To ensure maximum publicity, police tipped off the media, which filmed and photographed the proceedings.

The police operation sets a new benchmark both in terms of its size and the undermining of basic democratic rights. Most of the patrons were entirely innocent—their only “crime” was to be out enjoying themselves on a Saturday night. The only evidence against them was that they were at venues where police alleged that drugs were being sold. On that basis, hundreds of people were detained and searched.

A police spokesman claimed the raid had been a major blow against drug trafficking in NSW. However, the police dragnet resulted in the charging of just 18 people—14 of these on minor drug possession charges. Of the four people arrested for drug trafficking, one was found to have two ecstasy tablets. A further nine people were cautioned over minor cannabis offences.

Police forced the closure of the clubs for 72 hours and told the media that they would be applying to the NSW Licensing Court to revoke the licenses of four of the clubs. Under current legislation, the clubs will have to

demonstrate why they should remain operating.

Club manager Garth Lewis told the press that security guards were employed to search toilet cubicles every 15 minutes during his club's operations and that patrons caught with drugs were banned for life. “I don't understand how they [the police] expect me to stop it when they can't,” he said. “They have more powers than we do.”

The operation was clearly aimed at boosting the tarnished image of the police and the state Labor government headed by Premier Bob Carr. It took place less than two weeks after the Police Integrity Commission revealed that police in the Manly area, including a senior commander, not only took large bribes from drug dealers but also organised drug trafficking in the area.

The damning evidence from this inquiry has punctured Carr's claims that his government is cleaning up corruption in the NSW police force and successfully cracking down on drug trafficking. Carr, who faces election next year, was no doubt anxious to divert attention from the commission hearings. While the police claim to have planned last weekend's raid for eight months, the timing is just too fortuitous.

The NSW Council of Civil Liberties and the Redfern Legal Service immediately criticised the raid, saying that the blanket use of sniffer dogs for searches was illegal. Both groups announced legal action against the police.

Council for Civil Liberties spokesman Cameron Murphy explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* that it was unlawful to use sniffer dogs for mass searches. “The law requires police to either have a warrant or reasonable suspicion to be able conduct searches but they are using the dogs to search and then claim that the dog gives them evidence to go further.

“In the past, in order to provide reasonable suspicion, they would have to set up a surveillance unit, look carefully at what was going on and monitor people for days and then they might make an arrest. Now they are reinterpreting the law and using the dogs to randomly search people. This allows them to fill up their annual reports and say they’ve conducted this number of raids and charged so many people. It boosts their statistics and makes it look like they’ve done a lot when all they’ve done is arrested a lot of users.”

“We’ve had the Police Integrity Commission telling us that the police still cannot be trusted and right in the middle of all this bad publicity a stunt is pulled involving 300 officers to try and show the community that the police are doing something constructive.”

Last weekend’s raid is part of an intensifying assault on civil rights by state and federal governments throughout Australia. The Carr government has been in the forefront of these attacks, passing a raft of laws since it was first elected in 1995 that give sweeping powers to the police and which particularly target working class youth.

NSW police now have the right to detain youth under-18 without charge for up to 24 hours; stop and search anyone suspected of carrying a knife or drugs; and roadblock entire districts for up to six hours to conduct random searches of drivers, passengers and vehicles. All suspects over the age of 10 can be searched and forced to undergo body scans.

This year the government effectively abolished the legal right to the presumption of innocence for a range of drug-related offences. Under these laws, the police can arrest anyone entering or leaving a house suspected of containing drugs. Those charged have to prove that they have no connection with drug trafficking.

These laws have opened the way for a series of repressive police operations. In February this year, 80 police used explosive devices to blast their way into an inner city Internet café and pool hall. While police claimed that Asian gangs frequented the premises, no one was charged. Since then police have raided cafes, hotels and clubs in inner city Sydney in May, June and July, arresting a handful of people on minor drug charges.

The sheer scale of last weekend’s operation, however, marks a new stage in the Carr government’s assault on basic rights. A dangerous precedent has been

established in which thousands of young people have been detained without charge and forced to undergo police searches, simply because they were at a nightclub. While the raid was ostensibly a crackdown on drugs, the government is creating a climate of public opinion in which broad police sweeps on the flimsiest of evidence can be carried out on other pretexts, including against political opponents.

In a clear sign that police raids will continue and intensify, City East Region Police Commander Dick Adams told the media that undercover police would be used to gather evidence for future raids on clubs and other premises.



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