Police assault anti-WTO protesters in Australia

Mike Head
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Backed by state and federal government leaders, police attacked anti-World Trade Organisation (WTO) protesters in Sydney on Thursday and Friday. At least 50 demonstrators were arrested as police deliberately broke up rallies and marches.

The state Labor government set the scene for the police violence by outlawing marches in central Sydney for five days and by erecting a 3-kilometre long, 2.5-metre high steel and concrete barricade at Sydney Olympic Park, keeping demonstrators 300 metres from Friday's WTO mini-summit attended by representatives of 25 countries.

Premier Bob Carr's government attempted to prevent any demonstration at Olympic Park by shutting the park's train station, diverting public bus services, blocking vehicle entry and banning car parking throughout the complex. The small crowd of about 1,000 demonstrators was obliged to march three kilometres from a neighbouring train station.

When they arrived on Friday morning, three police helicopters hovered overhead, rows of police formed up behind the barricade and police dogs patrolled the grounds. Para-military Special Protection Group riot squads marched along the perimeter. A police command centre on the top two floors of the WTO venue, the Novotel Hotel, directed operations. Officers watched the crowd through binoculars and police cameramen filmed participants' faces. Mounted police paraded in front of the building.

Protesters' chants included, "This is not a police state, we have the right to demonstrate", "The whole world's watching" and "This is what democracy looks like". Others chanted, "WTO: You've got to go" and "WTO and CIA are the real terrorists of the world today''. Banners and placards also indicated opposition to the planned war on Iraq and the Howard government's denial of basic rights to asylum seekers.

Several small groups attempted to topple the barricade and succeeded in partially removing the wire mesh from its concrete base in one location. A riot squad unit swiftly ran from a nearby warehouse, shoving people aside, setting the tone for the police violence that was to follow. Whenever demonstrators shook the fence, police charged in, using wedge formations.

Police "snatch squads"—groups of 10 or so officers—began to barge into the crowd to seize individuals identified by surveillance cameras. Batons, fists and boots were used against anyone attempting to assist those arrested. One was a protest "medic" who had been treating participants injured by police in earlier clashes.

After about two hours, police demanded that everyone leave the area, despite it being officially designated a "passive protest zone," and arrested those who refused to depart. In some instances, people were grabbed by the hair and flung to the ground.

Sixteen of those arrested were playing soccer in the protest area. An officer snatched the ball away and another warned the protesters to disperse or face arrest. Officers then formed a wall and charged, selectively arresting 13 men and three women, who were dragged to police wagons. After a brief standoff during which police and six dogs corralled the protesters to prevent them moving off, people were allowed to leave.

Assistant Police Commissioner Dick Adams said the 35 people arrested would face charges of "violent disorder", hindering police and trespassing. Adams denied reporters' objections that police seized protesters who were retreating as ordered by officers. Among those arrested was Associated Press photographer David Guttenfelder.

On Thursday, police moved in against demonstrators after rallies in the centre of Sydney had defied the ban on street marches. About 2,000 people staged several demonstrations with banners, dancing and drum beating.

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There were no reports of property damage.

The only person injured was Patricia Karvelas, a journalist from the *Australian* newspaper, who was trampled by two police horses when mounted police suddenly charged the crowd. Ambulance officers treated Karvelas before taking her to hospital with a suspected fractured pelvis. She was later discharged with torn ligaments, severe bruising and concussion.

At least 15 people were arrested, including one charged with "offensive behaviour" for burning a United States flag. Three women were charged with offensive behaviour for lying naked splattered with red paint on a US flag. They later appeared in court but were released without conviction. No charges were laid against other detained protesters either, suggesting that police had no evidence against them.

New South Wales Police Minister Michael Costa condemned the demonstrators in state parliament, saying the only reason Karvelas was injured was that protesters had decided to take part in an illegal demonstration designed to cause "maximum chaos" in the city.

In the lead-up to the WTO meeting, Costa endorsed the police violence in advance. Asked in state parliament to guarantee that police would not use "inappropriate and illegal tactics," he replied: "Let us be clear: People are coming here to have a violent confrontation with the police. Let me say to you: The police will be prepared and I will back the police in what they do."

Costa, a former trade union bureaucrat, later defended the use of horses as a "legitimate" police tactic, dismissing criticisms that the previous state Liberal government had banned the deployment of horses against crowds 10 years ago.

Premier Carr declared his personal support for the dispersal of the protests, perversely describing the massive $5 million cost of the two-day security operation as "the price paid for democracy". After addressing the WTO delegates, Prime Minister John Howard labelled the protests "disgraceful" and stated: "The police have my total support on these issues. The public will feel for the police and I want to thank the New South Wales police for what they've done."

The protests were relatively small and politically extremely confused. Hostility to the Australian and US governments and corporate power, was mixed with economic nationalist opposition to globalisation and illusions in pressuring or reforming global financial institutions. Nevertheless, despite the lack of any real threat to the WTO gathering, the Howard and Carr governments reacted with vitriolic denunciations and vicious, anti-democratic measures.

It is part of a pattern. Over the past two years, governments in Australia, as elsewhere, have met political protests with police repression. On May Day this year, demonstrations in both Sydney and Melbourne were subjected to police attack, with at least 100 demonstrators requiring medical attention and 31 arrested in Sydney.

The previous year, police attacked the "M1" anti-globalisation protest in Sydney, while in March, the Queensland and federal governments deployed over 4,000 police and 2,100 military personnel to prevent protests at a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. In 2000, the Victorian Labor government ordered riot squad and mounted police to charge into demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum, injuring 400 people.

At the national level, the Howard Liberal government, assisted by the state Labor governments, has used the pretext of "the war on terrorism" to introduce legislation that will allow arbitrary detentions and the persecution of organisations and individuals for their political views. This week, the Carr government intends to unveil its own laws giving police far-reaching "anti-terrorist" search and detention powers.

State Greens MPs called for an inquiry into this week's police conduct, accusing the government of orchestrating it as part of a "law and order" campaign for the March 2003 state election. But the significance and implications of the police violence go far beyond the state election. It is calculated to intimidate all political dissent, revealing sharp concern in official circles with the growing opposition to the impending war against Iraq and hostility toward government policies in general.

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