

Australia: Hundreds of police mobilised to stop antiwar march

Richard Phillips
5 April 2003

In response to continuing, and increasingly angry, demonstrations against the brutal US-led war in Iraq, the state Labor government in New South Wales has resorted to repressive police measures to harass and intimidate antiwar protestors.

On April 2, an estimated 600 police were mobilised to enforce a ban by Premier Bob Carr on a march in Sydney by the “Book not Bombs” organisation—a coalition of mainly high school antiwar groups. Despite the ban, around 500 students gathered in a square near the city’s town hall, where they were surrounded by hundreds of police.

The police operation was one of the largest in recent times. Police, including Operational Support Group members and undercover police, began arriving hours before the scheduled rally. Senior officers used a large truck with a public address system to threaten students with mass arrest if they attempted to march. To emphasise the point, two rows of police lined the road.

A pressure cooker atmosphere was generated as the young protestors were unable to leave the square, except through one small exit point. Police officers, including a number in plain clothes, freely circulated through the crowd. Demonstration marshals, who confronted some of the undercover officers, were told they could be arrested for interfering with police work.

The mainstream media exacerbated an already tense situation. Some journalists and television crews were particularly provocative, attempting to stir up the younger and more excitable students. Private security guards accompanied most of these news crews.

In what was an illegal assault, an undercover policeman used pepper spray on some of the students, after they challenged his identity. One high school student was treated at the scene for inflamed eyes and rally organisers are investigating the assault. In all, 10

protestors were arrested, most after the rally had broken up.

There was no organised speakers platform as the police prevented organisers using a public address system they had hired. But a number of students used a handheld megaphone to angrily denounce the war and the Howard government and call for the withdrawal of Australian troops.

Placards carried included a picture of an Iraqi girl injured by bombing which read: “Is this liberation?”. Other banners said: “Save Iraqi children’s lives—let water tankers into Basra”, “No more media lies”, “Weapons of Mind Destruction.”

Students attended from a range of schools, including Mater Maria Catholic College and Marsden and Balmain High Schools. The largest and most vocal contingents were from high schools in working class areas such as Punchbowl, Lakemba, Wiley Park and Bankstown.

The huge police operation was mounted after a previous “Books not Bombs” demonstration in Sydney on March 26—just days after the US launched its invasion of Iraq. During that march, police, including special operations officers, provoked a number of clashes with their heavy-handed tactics, directed especially towards Middle Eastern students.

The media, in particular the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, immediately seized on the incidents to brand the protestors as a violent and uncontrollable mob. The newspaper published a string of editorials and comments, red-baiting the organisers, which include the middle class radical group Resistance, and demanding the government take action.

The vicious media campaign reflects deep concerns in ruling circles over the extent of the antiwar movement in Australia and the political radicalisation taking place

among young people.

The state Labor government and the trade union apparatus immediately fell into line. Labor premier Bob Carr told the press that “Marxist-Leninists”, “Trotskyists” and “anarchists” controlled the protests and had deliberately instigated clashes. He instructed police to ban the proposed march on April 2 and called on parents to stop their children attending.

Far from defending the democratic rights of the student protestors, the NSW Labor Council, the state’s peak union body, joined the witchhunt. It passed a resolution condemning the students for “splitting the antiwar movement” and demanding they cancel their scheduled April 2 protest. Labor Council secretary John Robertson claimed the protest had “set back the antiwar movement for months”.

The union bureaucracy then sought to isolate the “Books not Bombs” organisation. Construction union organiser Phil Davies moved the Labor Council resolution at a “Walk Against War” meeting—the semi-official antiwar protest committee—where it was passed with the backing of the National Union of Students.

It is significant that hundreds of high schools students, some as young as 12-years-old, defied the campaign of intimidation by the media, the Carr government, the trade unions and official protest organisers to turn up at the April 2 rally and register their opposition to the war.

World Socialist Web Site reporters distributed hundreds of WSWS statements and interviewed several youth who strongly condemned the government ban, heavy-handed police methods and the corporate-controlled media.

Hanna, a TAFE student, said: “More police means more violence. Their large numbers are simply to intimidate the young crowd.” Her friend Nick, a university student, said that trouble at the last protest was “provoked by police.”

Lindsay, a young retail worker who came to support the students, said it was important to continue protesting against the war. “These protests are important for bringing an awareness, not just pressure. It is very important to connect people and show solidarity in order to build a wider movement against war.”

Commenting on the march ban, she said it that was “the most horrific thing I’ve heard of because the basic

human right to protest is at stake. This ban, which is intended to isolate the students is a threat to democracy.”

Hamzeh Dover, from Punchbowl Boys High, said: “The media shows pictures of dead and wounded innocent Iraq men, women and children and calls it collateral damage. This is disgusting. We are here because we have to speak out against this war. If we don’t who will?

“The Carr government,” he continued, “tried to stop us demonstrating because it is afraid of what we have to say. They say it is a free country but this shows they don’t give a damn about democratic rights. “

Hannah, a 33-year-old Bankstown mother of five, attended the rally with her daughter Sarah (14) and Rana (12). “An undercover cop has used capsicum spray on the students here and my daughter Sarah copped some of it. This is completely wrong. It shows who is responsible for creating the problems with students—it’s the police. The government talks about freedom but this is police terrorism against young people, she said.

“We came to oppose this criminal war and be the voice of the innocent Iraqi children being killed in hundreds everyday by the US military. We are supposed to live in a democracy but are told we can’t march and are treated like criminals. Labor says it is against the war but how can they be when they doing this. Look at all the police here. This is being paid for through cuts to education and hospitals.”



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