

Meeting opposes Australia's draconian "anti-terror" laws

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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) addressed a public forum held last weekend to oppose the Howard government's "anti-terror" legislation, the continual erosion of legal and democratic rights and the political scapegoating of Muslims.

The Islamic Association Western Suburbs Sydney hosted the meeting entitled "Fortress Australia" in the working class suburb of Auburn. It attracted around 200 people, including Muslim and Arabic-speaking families and youth.

In addition to the SEP, speakers included representatives of the Greens, the Australian Democrats, the New South Wales Council of Civil Liberties, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Citizens Electoral Council and the Socialist Alliance. Dr Akbar Khan, president of the Islamic Association Western Suburbs Sydney and Dr Ibrahim Salem, an Islamic scholar, also spoke.

The meeting was organised under conditions in which the Howard government, backed by the ALP, is attempting to divert popular opposition to its social and economic policies into fears about terrorism. As part of its strategy for the coming federal election, the government has promoted a series of "anti-terror" arrests, claiming that these constitute victories in the "war on terror". On April 15, the Australian Federal Police arrested and charged a 21-year-old Sydney medical student, Izhar ul-Haque, for receiving training from an alleged terrorist organisation on a short visit to Pakistan, his country of birth, in early 2003.

Howard's ministers, with the support of the media, have tried to portray ul-Haque as dangerous and part of a wide terrorist network, based on flimsy allegations and before he had even faced trial. Yet, in what was a significant blow to the government, a judge let him out on bail, stating that ul-Haque was not a threat to the Australian people. The young student had already served 42 days in a "SuperMax" jail at Goulburn, 200 km south of Sydney.

Ul-Haque and another man, Khalid Lodhi, were arrested under "anti-terror" laws passed in 2002. These laws give unprecedented powers to the government and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to arrest individuals without charge and hold them for interrogation.

Mike Head, a correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site* and a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, told the

audience that the anti-terror laws had so far been used to target Muslims for base political reasons. "They have become one of the most demonised groups in society. But these laws are a threat to the most basic democratic and civil rights of all working people, particularly those who are politically active."

Head went on to explain the anti-democratic character of the laws. "Under these laws anyone can be framed up as a terrorist. 'Terrorism' has been defined so widely that it covers traditional forms of political action and protest, including strikes, pickets and street demonstrations. It is now a crime punishable by life imprisonment. The government can swiftly ban political parties and jail their supporters. ASIO, a notorious political police force, has gained previously unthinkable powers, including secret detention for up to a week without trial.

"Detainees can be forced to answer questions on pain of imprisonment, and cannot inform the media, or even their families, that they have been taken away for interrogation. These are the types of powers usually associated with military or fascist dictatorships."

Head asked: "How has this happened?" He said the laws were only passed because of the complicity of the ALP, the Greens and the Australian Democrats.

"Labor has voted for every single piece of the barrage of the counter-terrorism legislation that the Howard government has introduced over the past two years... In fact, it has criticised the government for not going far enough, advocating the establishment of a Bush administration-style Department of Homeland Security to bring ASIO and all other security agencies under a single command.

"While both the Democrats and Greens formally opposed most of the anti-terror laws, they have all adapted themselves to the 'war on terror' and helped legitimise the passage of the legislation through parliament by proposing various cosmetic amendments."

Head explained that the ASIO detention bill was so unpopular that it was delayed by over a year due to community opposition. Hundreds of submissions were sent to the Senate urging it to reject the Bill outright. Yet after the Bill was passed, with only minor amendments, the Senate became a scene of "mutual backslapping". The ALP's John Faulkner

thanked the Greens and Democrats for their contribution to the laws. Greens leader Bob Brown reciprocated and described the outcome as a “compliment to the role the Senate plays in that [Australian] democracy”. (See: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/jul2003/asio-j14.shtml>)

Head gave a detailed analysis of the underlying causes of the worldwide attack on democratic rights. He detailed the role the US government played in training and arming Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, and backing terrorist regimes in Israel and Saudi Arabia.

He reviewed the fundamental contradictions of the US and world economy that underlay the eruption of US militarism. “In the final analysis, the ripping up of democratic rights is rooted in the staggering and growing inequality that increasingly dominates every major capitalist power, as well as the globe as a whole.”

Head warned that whether the ALP or the Coalition won the next federal election, the government would continue to legalise and use even more anti-democratic measures. He called for the unity of all working people against the economic system responsible for such repression, and emphasised that the fundamental divisions in society were not those of race, religion or nationality, but of class.

Head’s report was in stark contrast to the contributions of the other speakers. Most pointed to the draconian character of the laws, but provided little explanation as to why these measures were being introduced in Australia and worldwide.

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All subscribed to the view that a Labor government would be a “lesser evil” than the Howard government and should, in the final analysis, be supported for that reason. The speakers sought to channel the opposition of the audience to attacks on democratic rights into pressuring the ALP to change its position and voting Howard out of office.

One of these speakers was Andrew Wilkie, known for publicly resigning from his job as an intelligence analyst for the government’s Office of National Assessments on the basis of opposition to the looming war in Iraq. Wilkie is running for parliament as a candidate for the Greens in the coming federal election. He said the Australian people had been “let down by a dishonest government, a weak public service, a weak media and a weak Labor Party”.

Nevertheless, in summing up, he made an implicit call for the election of a Labor government, saying “this government has a lot to answer for and I would dread to think what the situation would be in Australia if this government is returned in a federal election later this year. I intend to do everything I can to prevent that and I ask everyone here to do your bit to prevent that as well.”

Arthur Chesterfield Evans, an Australian Democrat in the New South Wales state Legislative Council outlined how the Howard government was seeking to further boost its powers.

He said that in the past two years Howard had passed 15 bills relating to terrorism. Yet he raised no criticism of the ALP, which had allowed the bills to go through.

The contribution of Raul Bassi of the Socialist Alliance amounted to a series of empty calls for protests. Without even an attempt at a political analysis, he declared “the only way to stop the laws is to be active”. Later, he exhorted those present to “put your feet on the street and keep protesting”. His appeals were limited to pressuring the ALP and other parties within the parliamentary system. “We’ve got to kick the Howard government out, but we have to say to the now opposition that we don’t accept these laws.”

Roger Price, a federal ALP parliamentarian, began his contribution by criticising the Howard government from the right. He said the ALP had opposed the war in Iraq to prevent it “taking the eye off the terrorist ball”. In fact, the ALP did not oppose the war. It merely insisted that the US-led invasion be carried out under UN sanction. Once it began, the Labor party argued that it needed to “support the troops”. Now that the war is turning into a disaster, Labor tries to claim it never lent support.

Price justified the ALP’s backing for all the anti-democratic laws passed since 2002 by saying that September 11 “changed everything”. He argued that Labor had made some amendments to the legislation and, in any case, one should not judge the party by what it had done in opposition, only what it did in government. He then left the door open for even further draconian laws, declaring that Labor would continually review the legislation to assess whether they were “proportionate” to the terrorist threat.

The audience was largely hostile to the ALP, particularly after Head had set out its criminal role in passing the anti-terror laws. Several audience members challenged Price to make a commitment that the ALP would repeal the legislation if re-elected. Each time he tried to deflect the question, audience members jeered him.

Australian workers have experienced decades of attacks on their social conditions and democratic rights by both major parties, and there is a deep sense of alienation from the entire official political establishment. Last weekend’s meeting highlighted the role played by the Greens, the Democrats and the Socialist Alliance in trying to prevent the working class breaking from the dead-end of the two-party system and parliamentary politics and seeking, instead, to funnel opposition back behind the ALP.



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