

In wake of racial violence in Sydney

Australian state government prepares savage attack on democratic rights

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In response to racial violence last weekend in Sydney, state Labor Premier Morris Iemma yesterday called an emergency session of the New South Wales (NSW) parliament for Thursday to pass a series of repressive measures that will allow police to declare “lockdown zones” throughout the city. The laws will provide extensive new powers to police who are already engaged in sweeping and unprecedented operations.

Last night police erected at least six checkpoints at various points in eastern Sydney. Motorists were stopped, and had to issue their driver’s licence and explain why they were driving into the area. At one checkpoint, a queue of more than 200 cars formed as police searched vehicles for weapons. People of Middle Eastern appearance were the primary target of the roadblocks. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that in one incident, four men and one woman were ordered by police to turn around and leave the area, despite no weapons being found. “We’ve done nothing wrong,” the woman said. “We’ve just been to visit a girl at Mortdale and came here for a drive.”

An extra 450 police, including 20 dog-squad units and riot police, patrolled the city’s eastern suburbs last night. At least one arrest was made, but the violence seen on Monday night was not repeated. The situation remains extremely tense. Over the past three days, at least 37 people have been injured and 27 arrested, cars and shops have been vandalised, and gunshots fired in several locations. In one incident, shots were fired at a church as a primary school held a Christmas carol service. Extra police from Queensland and Victoria may soon be brought into Sydney, and summer leave for many NSW officers has been cancelled.

In announcing the emergency recall of parliament yesterday, Iemma vowed to “take back the streets”.

“These criminals have declared war on our society and we are not going to let them win,” he declared. “I won’t allow Sydney’s reputation as a tolerant, vibrant international city to be tarnished by these ratbags and criminals who want to engage in the sort of behaviour we’ve seen in the last 48 hours... This is a fight that will continue and we will not be found wanting in the use of force to meet this, what is effectively a declaration of war.”

The new legislation will give police even more authority to close off streets, erect checkpoints, conduct random searches, and seize vehicles. Alcohol-free areas can be declared and licensed premises shut down. Penalties for riot convictions are to be extended from 5 years to 15, and for affray from 5 years to 10. The presumption of bail will also be removed for anyone charged for riot and violent disorder.

Many of these measures were first trialled during the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. They will now become part of everyday life. The modus operandi of the state Labor government is similar to that used by the federal government to ram through draconian new anti-terror legislation. In that case, Prime Minister John Howard seized on a terrorist scare to push through far reaching attacks on basic democratic rights without any significant debate in parliament or the media.

Likewise, in the wake of the racial violence, there will be no public discussion or even the semblance of a parliamentary debate on Iemma’s new legislation tomorrow. Having created the social and political climate that has led to the clashes in Sydney, the political establishment is rushing to exploit the situation to further its own right-wing “law and order” agenda.

Howard rang Iemma to back his response and the state opposition Liberal Party gave immediate support to the

proposed new laws. Opposition leader Peter Debnam has played a particularly foul role in fomenting racial division in recent days. He has accused police of implementing a “softly-softly” approach, and yesterday claimed that Sydney had become a “war-zone with roaming gangs of hundreds of ethnic thugs”.

Debnam’s perspective, if not openly racist language, is shared by politicians and media commentators of all stripes. The unanimous response to the aftermath of Sunday’s racist rally on North Cronulla Beach has been to blame young Muslims and Lebanese immigrants for causing trouble, and to demand greater police powers.

Like Howard, federal Labor leader Kim Beazley refused to describe Sunday’s attacks on Muslims as racist. “This is simply criminal behaviour, and that’s all there is to it, he declared on Monday. “Two major areas of it—Cronulla and Maroubra—and that is what has to be cracked down on, and that is what I would urge the police forces to do.”

In official responses to the violence in Sydney, no one has called for an examination of the economic deprivation and social inequality that has created such alienation among wide layers of working class youth. Nor is there any discussion as to who bears political responsibility for the reactionary and fratricidal manner in which these social tensions have been manifested.

Addressing these issues would inevitably lead to an indictment of the entire political order in Australia. In the interests of maintaining the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism, both Labor and Liberal governments in Canberra and Sydney have presided over a prolonged assault on the social position on the working class—undermining wages and conditions, destroying job security, and degrading public education. At the same time, social inequality has significantly deepened, as a small minority has accumulated enormous wealth.

Racial and religious differences have been deliberately inflamed, and sections of working class youth—particularly those who are Muslim—vilified and scapegoated to divert popular opposition to deepening social inequality.

The new laws proposed by the NSW government have nothing to do with protecting the safety of ordinary citizens. They are ultimately driven by the same impulse behind every measure introduced in recent years to strengthen the power of the capitalist state—namely the need to prepare for the suppression of future social unrest. Unable to provide decent employment and living conditions for working class youth, the response of the ruling elite is consistent and unambiguous—state

repression and the cultivation of racism and communalism.

The bipartisan reaction to the racial violence in Sydney is identical to that seen in other recent social eruptions. In its origin and form, the recent violence differs from both the Redfern riots in inner Sydney in February 2004 and the clashes between youths and police in outer suburban Macquarie Fields earlier this year. What is not different, however, is the response of the state government.

In all three cases the pattern has been the same: an enormous police operation is mounted, sections of working class youth are condemned as criminals and thugs, any examination of underlying political and social processes is rejected on principle, and draconian new laws are introduced.

The Australian media is an active accomplice in all of this. The *Australian*’s editorial, “Racism Not Endemic”, today assailed “academic and sundry other Howard-haters” who have condemned the government for contributing to the violence by demonising Muslim Australians. The newspaper concluded that the best way to prove that Australia was not racist “is for the worst offenders in the recent riots to be prosecuted—and treated exactly the same before the courts”.

The *Daily Telegraph*’s editorial, “More power to the rule of law,” argued on similar lines. The newspaper also ran as its lead op-ed an extraordinary “open letter” from an anonymous police officer. He pined for a return to the old days, when hoodlums “would cop a flogging, a kick up the bum, a slap over the head” from police. “The young kids were afraid of the police and that’s how we controlled and protected the community,” he continued. “Fear is the only thing a young male understands. That real power is lost forever.”

In a particularly crass form, the open letter summed up the attitude of the political and media establishment as a whole to working class youth.



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