

Australia: Police use new powers to “lock down” rural housing estate

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9 January 2006

Police in the rural New South Wales town of Dubbo activated the state Labor government’s newly legislated “lockdown” powers following a clash with about 100 Aborigines on New Year’s Eve. More than 60 officers erected roadblocks around the Gordon public housing estate and conducted random searches of individuals and vehicles. Non-residents were prevented access to the area, and police confiscated one vehicle after a knife was allegedly found.

According to Eunice Hartnett, an Aboriginal youth worker on the Gordon Estate, the violence erupted after police assaulted a 16-year-old youth who had been arrested for car theft. “They started to bash him,” she told the *Australian*. “His mother saw what was happening and she came tearing across the paddocks and then they were bashing her. Then her brother, his uncle, came to help, and he got smashed in the jaw. You can’t blame people for jumping in.”

Two police officers were reportedly injured in the ensuing clash. A police car and the stolen vehicle were also set alight. Thirteen people were later arrested, at least six of whom have been charged with riot and affray. Under the new laws, riot now carries a maximum jail sentence of 15 years, and affray 10 years, and anyone charged with these offences is denied bail unless they can prove “exceptional circumstances”.

The lockdown was suspended on January 2, but police warned that they would renew the action if any further unrest developed. “We want to send a clear message to the local community that any type of violent or anti-social behaviour will not be tolerated,” Detective Inspector Mick Willing declared.

Police lockdown powers were rushed through state parliament by the Labor government in the aftermath of the racial violence in the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla last month. Five thousand people rallied at North Cronulla Beach on December 11, chanting nationalist and racist slogans, and assaulting people who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent. In apparent retaliation, a number of vehicles, shops and people were later attacked in the area.

Premier Morris Iemma declared that “louts and criminals have declared war on our society”. Police used their new powers to lock down several suburbs in Sydney’s east. Roadblocks were thrown up, people searched at random, and vehicles and mobile phones were confiscated. “These were extraordinary measures for an extraordinary time,” the Police Commissioner Ken Moroney said.

The police operation in Dubbo establishes that far from being “extraordinary”, the new police powers were always aimed at

dealing with any eruption of social unrest. Little more than a fortnight after every NSW parliamentarian, including the Greens, voted for the government’s legislation, the police have used the powers to suppress a disturbance on an impoverished public housing estate.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, the government’s “emergency” legislation was bound up with the broader “law and order” agenda which has been whipped up by both the Labor and Liberal parties. Unable to provide decent living conditions and secure employment for an entire generation of working class youth, the ruling elite now relies on state repression to deal with the inevitable consequences of entrenched poverty and social inequality.

The New Year’s violence on Gordon Estate was sparked by a specific incident of alleged police brutality. It can only be understood, however, as an expression of the deep-rooted poverty and hopelessness that is an entrenched feature of social life throughout rural New South Wales. While the Australian establishment promotes the image of a prosperous and bustling Sydney, regional areas beyond the state capital are marked by stagnating or falling populations, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and inadequate health, education, and recreational facilities.

Dubbo is located 300 kilometres northwest of Sydney, and has 39,000 residents. The town is one of the few regional centres with a growing population, but this is largely due to the protracted disintegration of smaller neighbouring towns and surrounding family farms. Dubbo’s economy is based on its role as a transport hub for cereals and livestock, though a number of local service and manufacturing based businesses provide low-paid work. The Fletcher International Abattoir is the largest employer in the area.

According to the most recently available statistics, the unemployment rate in Dubbo for those under 19 is more than 15 percent. For males aged 20-24, the rate is 14.3 percent. These figures grossly underestimate the real extent of joblessness in the area. The official figures do not cover the under-employed, those who have dropped out of the job market, and Aborigines dragooned into “work for the dole”-style Community Development Employment Projects.

Recreational and cultural facilities for young people in Dubbo are virtually non-existent. The Dubbo City Council admitted in its 2005-2006 “Social Plan” that, “for young people aged 18-21 years, beyond sport, cinema and home based activities there are

very few activities, entertainments or places for social interaction that are not related to premises licensed to sell liquor.” Unemployment is then compounded by boredom, which fuels petty crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and depression and mental health problems.

Conditions for Aboriginal residents are particularly atrocious. There are approximately 4,000 Aborigines in Dubbo, many of whom moved to the town from smaller regional centres. Unemployment is endemic among the indigenous population, with almost 27 percent of Aboriginal men in Dubbo and 23 percent of Aboriginal women officially unemployed.

Many Aboriginal people face employers who refuse to even consider hiring a black worker. Prejudice and discrimination is an entrenched part of life for Aborigines in rural centres such as Dubbo, as it is for many indigenous people throughout Australia. Right-wing politicians and media outlets habitually whip up racist sentiment against Aborigines to further their own agenda. In Dubbo, black people are typically followed around shops by security guards, while police are notorious for their racist practices.

The Gordon Estate in West Dubbo represents a concentrated expression of the social crisis afflicting Aboriginal people in NSW. The public housing centre accommodates 5,000 people of whom approximately four-fifths are Aboriginal. About half of those living on Gordon Estate are under 15. The area is afflicted by widespread alcohol and drug addiction, which is a product of the despair and hopelessness caused by the absence of any future prospects. The drug trade has spurred other criminal activity, and there have been numerous reports of assaults, car thefts, arson attacks on houses, and other offences being committed by young people.

The social crisis facing Aborigines—and ordinary working people as a whole—in rural centres such as Dubbo is a direct consequence of the reactionary economic and social agenda implemented by successive governments, both Labor and Liberal, at federal and state level. Social inequality has deepened, particularly over the past two decades, as pro-business measures have been accompanied by repeated cuts in government spending on health, education, and other social services. All of these so-called reforms are bound up with a general assault on the wages and living conditions of the most vulnerable layers of the working class, of which the Aboriginal people form a significant part.

The NSW government’s response to the situation on the Gordon Estate is indicative of the political establishment’s broader perspective. Over the past 18 months, there have been a series of well-publicised incidents of social unrest and criminal activity in Dubbo’s public housing areas. In early 2005 the state government announced a “whole of government” strategy. Various government ministers, with media in tow, visited Dubbo and promised to help local residents. While there was much talk of “community consultation” and “partnership” programs with residents, the government refused to make any commitment to increase spending on social programs.

The central thrust of the strategy was to increase police powers in the area, and introduce a range of other punitive measures, such as making it easier for authorities to evict public housing tenants.

This approach was no different to the government’s reaction to other recent eruptions of frustration and alienation, such as those in the Sydney suburbs of Redfern in February 2004 and Macquarie Fields last February. The government exploited each incident to further step up police repression, as well as to promote the extension of “free market” economic and social policies that are responsible for creating the situation in the first place.

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES), which has been hailed by the NSW and federal governments, combines both of these approaches. The AES, which operates as an employment agency in regional NSW, was founded in 1997 by prominent cotton agribusinessman Dick Estens, who has close connections with the Howard government. In 2002, he was appointed head of an official inquiry to facilitate the full privatisation of the telecommunications company Telstra.

Estens established the AES on an explicitly right-wing and pro-business basis. “There’s a third of Aborigines who’ll just never work,” he told *Time* last year. “Welfare can handle them. The top third, educated and with good work experience, will always be okay. The AES is here for that middle third.”

The AES provides retail chains and agribusinesses with low-wage Aboriginal labour for predominantly menial jobs. He promotes his services to local businesses in Moree, Tamworth, Dubbo, and Sydney with the provocative slogan, “Why not employ a middle-class black instead of white trash?” This racist approach, which will only further exacerbate tensions by pitting working class Aborigines and whites against each other, has received the unanimous support of the political establishment.

The Howard government has promised \$17 million in funding over the next four years for the AES. The Dubbo Council gave the agency another \$20,000, while the NSW government has repeatedly expressed its support for the AES’s operations. Estens was even awarded the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s “human rights medal” in 2004 for his establishment of the employment agency.

While governments slash spending on essential services, millions of dollars are allocated to what are, in effect, privatised police programs. In Dubbo, most of the jobs generated through the AES are in security. About 17 Aborigines work as security guards patrolling the Gordon Estate. “The idea of the warrior and the place of men in Aboriginal families has been eroded,” Estens declared. “Security work builds male self-esteem in these towns.”

In reality, the security program has nothing to do with building Aborigines’ “self esteem”. Young Aboriginal men with no alternative employment prospects are being forced to accept low-paid and dead-end security work, in order to serve as an auxiliary police force over their own impoverished communities.

The resulting social explosion has now been seized upon to establish a precedent for the use of the new “lockdown” powers throughout working class areas whenever discontent erupts.



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