Australia: Riot squad called to shut down Aboriginal community

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The increasingly vicious resort by both federal and state governments in Australia to police repression to deal with deep-rooted social deprivation in Aboriginal communities was on display in a chilling riot squad operation last month.

Scores of officers from the recently formed New South Wales Public Order and Riot Squad, joined by highway patrol units, were mobilised around the Gordon public housing estate in the rural town of Dubbo, about 400 kilometres west of Sydney. The May 11 encirclement of the estate by police in full riot gear produced shock and anxiety among the mainly Aboriginal residents, who wondered what great crime had occurred to warrant such a massive police presence.

As it happened, no crime had been committed, at least not by any resident. Rather, the police presence was requested by the state Labor government and its housing minister, Cherie Burton, to announce—with no prior warning to the 5,000 residents—that the government intends to close down the estate and sell off its 278 homes. Most will probably be bulldozed to make way for private developers.

This event marks a further sharp turn in social policy. Entire public housing estates have been torn down in NSW in recent years, including at Villawood East, in Sydney's western suburbs, in order to cut social spending and make way for real estate profiteers. Other estates in Sydney's west, including at Bonnyrigg, Macquarie Fields and Minto, are being partially demolished.

Over the past 18 months, riot police have also been called out to put down riots and unrest sparked by the impoverished and run-down conditions on the Gordon and Macquarie Fields estates, as well as in the traditional inner-city Aboriginal district of Redfern.

This is the first time, however, that police have been deployed on a large scale to directly impose regressive social policies, such as the closure of housing estates, and to quell any opposition. These are measures associated with police state regimes, and are a warning of the methods that will increasingly be used by the political establishment against wider layers of the working class.

The police operation was conducted secretively, in the dead of the night; almost as if a local coup were being prepared.

Orana Area police commander, Superintendent Stuart Smith, later told the Dubbo *Daily Liberal* newspaper: "Late (on Wednesday night) I received a briefing from Mrs. Burton's office saying there would be a controversial announcement in Dubbo. When a minister wants to do that—especially in estates that are classified as high risk—we have to have a significant police presence, so straight away we mobilised units of the riot squad and brought them up to Dubbo in darkness."

Members of the riot squad also escorted the minister throughout Dubbo, including to the offices of the *Daily Liberal*, where they stood guard outside while the minister briefed the newspaper. Superintendent Smith said the riot squad would continue to be on standby should a violent backlash arise. "It is hard to tell which way it is going to go," he said. "Already there's been some resistance by the community in terms of verbal altercations and I believe we may see some more."

No arrests were made on May 11 but the deputy commissioner has the power to call on extra resources if needed. Police Minister Carl Scully said police would stay in the area to ensure that the shutdown, scheduled to take three years, was implemented without any "trouble".

Burton claimed that the redevelopment was designed to "break the cycle of crime and vandalism which had emerged over the past 20 years". But the central thrust of the project is to evict so-called "problem" tenants en masse and disperse others across the state. Burton stated that only tenants with "good tenancy records" would be re-housed and refused to say what would happen to the remainder.

Dubbo is a regional centre with a population of about 40,000. For 25 years, the Gordon estate has been home to some 5,000 people, of whom about 4,000 are currently Aboriginal. The sprawling and dilapidated suburb has one of the highest concentrations of poverty and inequality in the country. The official unemployment rate among Aboriginal men is 27 percent, and 23 percent for females; both are more than five times the national average. The real jobless situation is even worse, but masked by "work for the dole" schemes.

About half the people on the estate are aged under 15. There is widespread alcohol and drug addiction, which has spurred on criminal activity such as car theft and arson attacks, as well as outbursts of social unrest.

Residents claim that the government has been tacitly

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encouraging the arsonists to hasten the estate's demise and justify its bulldozing. Of the 278 dwellings, 86 are uninhabitable—40 are boarded up and another 46 are totally burnt out.

A long-time resident of the estate, Jennifer Baker, voiced her indignation on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio. "I talk for the percentage of the Aboriginal people that live here. They've lived here for years, they've reared their kids up in these houses. You know this is the closest that Aboriginal people will get to their own home, is a housing commission home. And they reared their children up here, and Aboriginal people shouldn't be treated like this. It's got to stop."

Over the past two years, the estate has been subjected to a campaign of vilification and scare-mongering, accompanied by stories of criminal behavior splashed across the media. The aim has been to marginalise residents and present them as social pariahs unworthy of any support or sympathy.

This campaign culminated in a "lock-down" of the estate in January following a clash between 100 residents and police following the police beating of an Aboriginal youth. Roadblocks were erected around the estate and residents prevented from entering and leaving.

"Lock-down" powers were rushed through state parliament in an emergency session following the racially-motivated violence in the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla last December. The WSWS warned at the time that the new powers were aimed at suppressing social unrest rather than dealing either with such "extraordinary" events or threats of terrorism. The police operation on May 11 confirms that state repression is increasingly the only response that Liberal and Labor governments alike have to entrenched poverty and inequality.

Whilst Aboriginal people, who represent the most exploited and vulnerable sections of the working class, have been the initial targets, broader sections of workers, who confront a future of unemployment and destruction of their living standards, will confront similar methods as they fight to defend their conditions. A precedent has now been set where riot police can be called to impose closures of factories, schools and hospitals where opposition may be anticipated.

The new 50-man riot squad, which can call on another 1,200 "riot-trained" officers, was established on January 1 as part of the NSW Counter Terrorism Co-ordination Command. It is another example of how the "war on terror" is being used as a cover for an assault on democratic rights. The Counter-Terrorism Command Centre, established in 2002, has a mission, according to the NSW Police web site, "to provide a comprehensive and co-ordinated response to acts of terrorism or politically motivated violence".

No opposition was expressed to the Dubbo operation by any of the parliamentary parties, pointing to the underlying unanimity within the political establishment. For the thousands of Gordon residents, concerned about what the future may bring, faced with being thrown onto the streets and ripped apart from the community in which they have grown up, there is not an inch of sympathy or support in these circles.

The events in Dubbo also received very little media coverage—barely a few paragraphs, mainly by regional outlets. No photographs or details of the police contingent have been published. This demonstrates the willingness of the mainstream media to collude in suppressing coverage and debate about undemocratic measures directed against Aboriginal and other working people.

One searched in vain too for any coverage in the Aboriginal-run media. On the contrary, one of the purported spokesmen for Aboriginal people, Australian Labor Party national president Warren Mundine, immediately declared his support for the estate's closure. Mundine, who is also a former Dubbo city councillor, welcomed the decision in language no different to right-wing media commentators. Referring to the Gordon residents, he said: "This small minority group has done tremendous damage to us over many, many years and now hopefully we can get rid of them."

Mundine's indifference to the deep-rooted oppression and poverty within the Aboriginal community and his assertion that nothing can be done other than to evict residents from their homes is the outlook of a privileged social layer that has been incorporated into the official state structures and political apparatuses. The notion that Aborigines, or other working people, could advance their interests through exerting pressure on the Labor Party and changing its policies has led to a political dead-end, while enabling the enrichment of a tiny few.

The policy of dispersing "troublemakers" to far-flung corners of the countryside is a deeply reactionary one. It aims to isolate people, destroy the limited social and neighbourhood networks that exist and breakup the social unrest that has developed. Political and media representatives in other towns have made it clear that they do not want Aborigines relocated to their neighbourhoods.

While the overriding factor in the government's decision to close down the estate is the running down of public housing over the past two decades and its refusal to finance the social infrastructure needed to improve the conditions of the residents, definite commercial interests are also at play.

Property values in the Dubbo area have doubled and in some cases tripled over the past four years, outperforming most other capital investments. The $55 million "redevelopment" project may yield a bonanza for investors seeking to exploit the property boom.

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