NSW state election campaign:

Morris Iemma, Bob Carr and the “war on terror”

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In the face of obvious popular hostility toward the 12-year-old Labor government in New South Wales, Premier Morris Iemma has spent the current election campaign trying to disassociate himself both from his predecessor Bob Carr, and from the “Labor” brand itself.

His election campaign launch, for example, was noteworthy for the absence of any reference to the Labor Party on banners, placards or in his keynote address.

In one field, however, Iemma has been anxious to claim Carr’s mantle. Like Carr, he has taken the lead in scapegoating Muslims and exploiting the bogus “war on terror” to trample over basic legal and democratic rights.

When Carr took office in 1995, he pioneered the way nationally in “law and order” demagogy, particularly aimed at Asian and Middle Eastern youth. Its purpose was to blame working class youth and their parents—especially those from the most disadvantaged immigrant backgrounds—for the social problems produced by falling living standards, attacks on working conditions, and deteriorating public schools, hospitals and other services.

Carr set the tone in Labor’s 1995 election campaign when he declared that any young person who wore a baseball cap backward was a “gang member”. Over the next four years, he repeatedly denounced alleged ethnic “gangs” and set up special police squads to target immigrant suburbs. At the next election in 1999, Labor’s main slogan was “Tough Times Requires Tough Action”. TV ads showed Carr walking through well-guarded railway stations and streets at night, extolling his government’s record of boosting police and transit police numbers.

Labor introduced a barrage of unprecedented police powers. The 1997 *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act* allowed police to detain minors under 18 without charges for up to 24 hours and impose curfews in declared areas. Parents were made liable for any offences allegedly committed by their children. Other laws permitted police to “move on” young people, conduct body searches on streets and in schools, and demand ID.

In response to the inevitable eruptions of anger, frustration and alienation, Carr’s government authorised violent police operations, such as those in Redfern in February 2004 and Macquarie Fields in February 2005. In both instances, riots were triggered by police actions resulting in the deaths of young people. Labor exploited the incidents to further step up police repression, while at the same time continuing the “free market” agenda responsible for the underlying social crises.

Just before leaving office, Carr pointed to what he considered to be one of his government’s major “achievements”: that the state’s prison population had risen above the 9,000 mark for the first time. According to his twisted logic, the more people behind bars, the healthier NSW would be!

In reality, the 50 percent increase in prison numbers since 1995 are the product of worsening social conditions, the overturning of basic rights, such as the presumption of innocence; new laws against the granting of bail; and the imposition of much longer jail sentences.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, Carr joined with the Howard government in seizing upon the “war on terror,” to introduce far-reaching anti-democratic legislation.

NSW police were given unprecedented powers to search homes and offices without informing the occupants for six months, as well as extended powers to bug suspects continuously for up to three months. Covert search warrants permitted police to enter premises, seize property, copy documents, operate computers and other electronic equipment, and conduct forensic tests.

None of these measures was needed to protect ordinary people from terrorists. Every conceivable terrorist act was already a crime, and the police and intelligence agencies had a vast array of powers, including to tap phones, bug premises, intercept mail and hack into computers. Just as lies about “weapons of mass destruction” were used to justify Australian participation in the US-led war on Iraq, fears of terrorism were cynically manipulated to introduce draconian measures at home.

In 2003, Carr denounced as “dishonourable” the painting of “No War” on the Opera House roof to protest the imminent invasion of Iraq. The two antiwar painters subsequently

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received huge fines. To accustom people to the sight of troops and heavily armed riot squads on the streets, Carr hosted joint federal-NSW exercises utilising the military, the intelligence agencies and paramilitary police.

After replacing Carr in August 2005, Iemma accelerated the Labor government's collaboration with Howard. In September 2005, together with the other state Labor premiers, he approved new police-state measures at a Council of Australian Governments "counter-terrorism" summit. These included "preventative" detention without charge, "control orders"—a form of house arrest—revamped sedition laws to jail people who support resistance to Australian military interventions overseas, and expanded powers to call-out the military to suppress domestic unrest.

Iemma boasted that his government had the "toughest anti-terror laws" in the country and "remains committed to working closely with the Commonwealth and all other states and territories against the threat of terrorism".

In order to justify pushing the laws through parliament, Howard suddenly announced a terrorist "alert", followed immediately by the rounding up of 20 Muslim men in Sydney and Melbourne in the largest police raids in Australian history. The men were subsequently charged with "conspiracy" and other vaguely worded offences and thrown into Guantánamo Bay-style isolation cells, where they remain incarcerated to this day. No evidence was produced of any imminent terrorist plot.

Taking the affair even further, Iemma's government introduced special regulations to classify anyone charged with a terrorism offence as an "AA terrorist inmate," subjecting them to inhuman and degrading conditions, shackled and dressed in orange uniforms.

Support for these anti-democratic measures was accompanied by an intensified anti-Muslim and anti-Arab witch-hunt.

Following the Cronulla Beach race riot, in which a racist mob, whipped up by government anti-Muslim rhetoric and urged on by right-wing media commentators, assaulted people of Middle Eastern appearance, Iemma called an emergency parliamentary session to pass laws to allow police to declare "lockdown zones," close off streets, erect checkpoints, conduct random searches and seize vehicles. The laws were aimed, not at the instigators of the riot, but at its victims who had attempted to carry out reprisal attacks against their tormentors.

Liberal leader Peter Debnam demanded the immediate detention of "200 Middle Eastern thugs," while 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 insisted. Every NSW parliamentarian, including the three Greens MPs, voted for the legislation.

Just two weeks later, police in the rural NSW town of Dubbo activated the "lockdown" powers to suppress a disturbance involving about 100 Aborigines on an impoverished housing estate. More than 60 officers erected roadblocks around the Gordon estate and conducted random searches of individuals and vehicles.

Then in May 2006, scores of officers from the newly-formed Public Order and Riot Squad, joined by highway patrol units, surrounded the Gordon estate as the government announced—with no prior warning to the 5,000 mostly Aboriginal residents—that it intended to shut it down and sell off the houses.

Incapable of providing any solution to the escalating social crisis throughout the state, Iemma has placed the "war on terror", along with "law and order" at the centre of his election campaign. In January, he denounced Howard for refusing to outlaw an Islamic fundamentalist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir and then used media reports about a conference in Sydney to claim that "it wants to declare war on Australia, our values and our people".

Later that month, the Labor premier presided over the graduation of the largest-ever class of NSW police, taking the force's numbers to a record 15,300—an increase of 17.8 percent since 1995. The ceremony began with an operational demonstration by the Public Order and Riot Squad, whose new equipment includes a high-power water cannon for use against protesters.

Under his campaign slogan, "Heading in the right direction," Iemma has promised to bolster the Police Counter Terrorism Command by another 110 officers to more than 600, and to boost the police force as a whole by a further 750 before the end of 2011. He said Labor would equip police with digital imagery equipment to enable three-dimensional, 360-degree recording of security and crime scenes. This technology would also allow police to identify faces in demonstrations and other crowds.

The purpose of all these measures is to promote constant fears and insecurities about terrorism and crime, and divert the attention of ordinary people away from grappling with the real sources of the social and economic problems they confront—the "free market" policies of both state and federal governments and, more fundamentally, the capitalist profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the NSW elections to fight for the unity of all working people—regardless of nationality, religion, skin colour or ethnic background—against racism, militarism and war; for the defence and extension of democratic rights; and for genuine social equality. This requires the building of an independent movement of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. I urge all those workers and young people who support these aims to participate in our campaign and to join and build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.

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