Australia: The true face of the "war on terror"

Anti-terror police raid homes of Sydney University students

Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Marrickville, NSW (Australia)
20 March 2007

Last week's highly provocative raids by anti-terrorism police on a number of University of Sydney students underscore the real political agenda behind the so-called war on terror. The bolstering of the state apparatus through a series of draconian "anti-terror" laws has been centrally aimed not at protecting ordinary people from the threat of terrorist attack, but rather at suppressing political dissent and intimidating anyone considering challenging the government or the state.

Five people have been charged with a number of offences allegedly relating to protests held in Melbourne last November at the G20 meeting of international financial leaders. Anti-terrorism police coordinated a series of raids on five different residences last Wednesday morning. Each raid involved between eight to fifteen police from both NSW and Victoria. Police kicked down a door and ransacked other homes during the operation. Officers photographed personal belongings of the accused, including political t-shirts and memorabilia. Four young men were arrested, three of whom are University of Sydney students while the other reportedly works as a librarian there. One of the students, Dan Jones, is the Student Representative Council's Education Officer. A 17-year-old was also charged and later appeared before a children's court.

A number of serious charges potentially involving lengthy prison sentences were laid against the accused, including aggravated burglary, conduct endangering a person, riot, affray, unlawful assembly, and criminal damage.

The four young men were detained in gaol for eleven hours before being released on bail, but only after the court imposed onerous bail conditions amounting to house arrest. They appeared in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court today but a committal hearing was adjourned until May 11. Until that date, the students must report to their nearest police station three times a week. They were also forced to hand over their passports and are not allowed to move from their present residences. It remains unclear what alleged acts the criminal charges relate to.

Victorian police mounted a massive police operation on November 18 and 19 last year for the G20 summit, which brought together finance ministers of the world's leading economies along with the heads of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Four blocks of central Melbourne were closed off by hundreds of police, together with the riot squad, police dogs and helicopters. About 3,000 people attended the demonstrations, during which a small number of protestors clashed with police, causing a number of injuries to both sides.

The media seized upon these incidents to slander everyone who attended the anti-G20 protests, while the police launched an ongoing investigation labelled "Taskforce Salver". The presumption of innocence was effectively thrown out the window as police released photographs of 28 wanted protestors who Victorian police chief Richard Grant accused of involvement in "the upper end of criminality". Unsurprisingly, no official investigation has been conducted into the actions of the police who had reportedly assaulted several protestors.

The involvement of "anti-terrorist" personnel in the Sydney raids is highly revealing. The raids make clear that the real targets of the Howard government's hysterical anti-terror rhetoric are people who openly express political opposition. It now appears that any expression of political dissent deemed unlawful by the state is regarded as terrorist activity.

The manner in which the five arrested Sydney residents were traced by the anti-terrorist police raises further serious questions. Following the raids, the University of

© World Socialist Web Site

Sydney's Student Representative Council (SRC) submitted an official request to the university council asking whether it cooperates with ASIO, state or federal police requests for information on students.

SRC President Angus McFarland told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had received information from a journalist that ASIO has a number of agents and informants targetting protest groups and political organisations on the campus. McFarland was also told that it was possible his phone and email conversations were being monitored. Surveillance has reportedly been stepped up ahead of the APEC summit due to be held in Sydney in September.

There is no doubt, however, that ASIO's campus activities are driven by much broader concerns than just the APEC meeting. Ever since the agency was founded in 1949 to help contain post-war political unrest, ASIO has been notorious for its harassment, dirty tricks, and frame ups of government opponents and political dissidents, particularly those identified with the socialist movement. Amid escalating opposition to the war in Iraq and mounting disaffection and hostility towards the entire political establishment, the political police are anticipating and preparing for the radicalisation of broad layers of student youth. Last week's raids in Sydney will no doubt be followed by further provocative police actions aimed at intimidating young people.

Students must actively guard against ASIO infiltration. There is every possibility that agents provocateurs are being inserted into various political organisations and protest groups. A long history exists, in Australian and internationally, of the state launching violent provocations in order to create a pretext for suppressing dissent and targeting political opponents.

ASIO justified its activities during the Cold War by pointing to the alleged threat to national security posed by the "communist menace". Today the so-called war on terror provides the ideological framework within which an unprecedented assault against basic democratic rights is being launched. Under the banner of the "war on terror", US President George W. Bush has claimed unlimited and unchecked constitutional authority to take whatever measures he deems necessary to protect "national security". Similar anti-democratic conceptions underline Australia's "anti-terror" laws, passed by the Howard government with the support of the Labor Party, Greens and Democrats.

The role of anti-terrorism police and possible involvement of ASIO in last week's arrests in Sydney has far reaching implications for democratic rights. "Terrorism" is now being defined so broadly as to potentially cover any political activity not welcomed by the state. The question can be raised: if this is the case, what is to stop the government classifying dissidents as "enemy combatants" and stripping them of all legal and constitutional rights, as has already happened to those accused of involvement in Al Qaeda?

The media has refused to discuss any of the issues arising out of last week's raids. Aside from a few cursory reports, the press has buried the case. Similarly, not a single political party contesting the March 24 NSW state election has publicly condemned the provocative police actions or campaigned in defence of student rights. This universal silence again demonstrates the absence of any constituency for the defence of democratic rights within the ruling elite and underscores the importance of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign.

The struggle for the defence of democratic rights lies at the very heart of the SEP's intervention in the state election, alongside our central focus on mobilising the working class against war and militarism. As our election statement explains: "The disintegration of constitutional rights and democratic forms of rule, in Australia and around the world, ultimately derives from the ever-widening social divide between the wealthy elite and the working class. Democracy is fundamentally incompatible with a social system in which a tiny ultra-wealthy minority pursues an agenda which is diametrically opposed to the interests and sentiments of the vast majority of the population."

The SEP, and its aligned student movement the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), emphatically opposes the phoney "war on terror" which has been used as a pretext for waging illegal wars abroad and for attacking long established constitutional rights at home. We call on all working people and youth to support the SEP's election campaign and for university and high school students to help build the ISSE in opposition to war, militarism, social inequality, and the mounting attacks on democratic rights.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site