

Australia: Police-state measures for APEC summit in Sydney

Mike Head
21 May 2007

Unprecedented military and police powers will be in force for this September's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Sydney. Fundamental democratic rights and civil liberties will be flouted in order to block protests and prevent ordinary people from getting anywhere near the gathered government leaders, including US President George Bush.

The measures are the most blatantly anti-democratic yet in the five-year bipartisan attack on basic legal rights conducted under the banner of the "war on terror" by the federal government of Prime Minister John Howard and his state Labor counterparts. Howard and New South Wales Labor Premier Morris Iemma last week jointly announced measures that will include extensive "exclusion zones" throughout inner Sydney, random police street searches and the deployment of heavily-armed SAS troops.

According to further details outlined over the weekend by NSW Police Minister David Campbell, antiwar demonstrators and anyone else considered "suspicious" will be arrested and detained without bail for the duration of the September 6-9 summit. "Known troublemakers" will also be denied access to restricted zones, to avoid any "embarrassment" to dignitaries. These measures amount to a new form of detention without trial, and constitute a direct attack on freedom of political expression and movement.

Federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock immediately defended the proposed state legislation. Yet, while claiming that such initiatives were needed to thwart terrorists, he conceded that no specific terrorist threat existed and that the official terrorist alert level would remain unchanged at "medium".

In reality, the measures are aimed at outlawing dissent and stifling opposition to the APEC meeting. Protestors are being branded as violent and bracketed with terrorists. A planned antiwar march will be blocked from

proceeding anywhere near the vicinity of APEC venues.

Apart from Bush, who bears primary responsibility for the invasion of Iraq, the participants in the annual 21-nation APEC leaders' summit include key partners in Washington's war crimes, such as Howard, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Other attendees, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, have willingly exploited the bogus "war on terror" for their own political purposes.

Being held in the heart of Australia's biggest city, the event has become a testing ground for police-state and martial law methods. Public opinion is being conditioned to accept draconian police powers and the internal use of the military against civilians. NSW Deputy Premier John Watkins recently stated that the disruption would be "50 times" worse than that of the February visit of US Vice President Dick Cheney, when the Sydney Harbour Bridge and other major traffic routes were closed off, causing lengthy delays.

While no details have been released of the yet-to-be-drafted special NSW police powers legislation, aspects have been leaked to the tabloid media. Police will be granted powers to detain people and conduct random body searches in "declared zones". While residents and some visitors will be allowed to enter the zones, they will be under constant surveillance by counter-terrorism police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

Further legislation will be introduced to permit foreign government security agencies to carry weapons and enforce their own security arrangements against residents. Special permissions have already been given to the US Secret Service.

Mobile phone calls will be blocked in central Sydney whenever President Bush's heavily-armoured motorcade

passes through the city. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, a helicopter with signals and mobile phone jamming equipment will hover above Bush's procession, supposedly to prevent remote control bomb attacks.

One of the "declared zones" will cover almost the entire central business district of Sydney, bounded by Macquarie Street, King Street, George Street and Circular Quay. Three inner-city train stations, St James, Museum and Circular Quay, will be shut for three days. Another "security triangle" will blanket harbourside areas, with its three points being the Opera House, Government House and the Darling Harbour convention centre. Road routes to the airport, some 8 km from the centre, will constitute another "declared zone".

Other, as yet unspecified, "lock-down" zones will be completely off limits to the public. These are likely to surround all meeting venues and hotel locations. Many hundreds of police, including riot and counter-terrorism units armed with shields and automatic weapons, are expected to be deployed to enforce the "lock-down" zones and block any anti-APEC demonstrations.

In addition, government and military authorities will mobilise hundreds of military personnel. Any alleged threat to the APEC participants, whether a supposed terrorist plot or political protest, could see the SAS Tactical Assault Group called out onto the streets.

During an APEC security display at Sydney's Holsworthy Barracks last December, SAS troops with high-powered machine guns and wearing gas masks stormed buildings and took aim at targets. Photos from the display on-line at the Department of Defence Media Room show SAS troops breaking down doors of homes and pointing weapons at the camera. (
<http://www.defence.gov.au/media/download/2006/Dec/20061213.cfm>)

During the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games, thousands of troops, including SAS commandos, were deployed, but mostly behind the scenes. During US President Bush's 2003 visit to Canberra, air force jets also flew overhead, enforcing a "no-fly" zone.

Both the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games became pretexts for the passage of legislation giving the federal government and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) explicit powers, for the first time in Australian history, to call out troops to put down "domestic violence".

Last year's changes to the Defence Act gave ADF

personnel extraordinary domestic powers, including to interrogate civilians and seize documents. Troops now have legally protected rights to use lethal force, including to shoot down passenger aircraft. In the event of civilian deaths or injuries, a new defence of "superior orders" protects soldiers, except if the orders were "manifestly unlawful".

The prime minister acting alone can now order soldiers onto the streets, if he thinks "critical infrastructure" or a "Commonwealth interest" is threatened by undefined "domestic violence". The government can also give the Chief of the Armed Forces standing orders to activate the military whenever he thinks it necessary.

No callout order need be in writing. Nor does any notice have to be given to the public or parliament. Thus, ordinary people may be confronted by troops on the streets, or on their doorstep, without knowing that a call-out has been ordered. Moreover, few people know about these powers, because last year's amendments were passed with the Labor Party's support with virtually no debate.

These provisions trample over the basic political, constitutional and legal principle—dating back to the overthrow of Charles I in Britain in the seventeenth century—against using the armed forces to deal with civilian disturbances.

The public is being conditioned to accept an ever-wider use of the military against civilians. More police-military exercises are being staged in the lead-up to the APEC summit, including a current fortnight-long operation codenamed Blue Luminary 2. Media reporters were this week treated to a display of police commandos arriving in the Botanic Gardens via helicopters. Such was the "security" atmosphere that a Botanic Gardens worker, with hedge trimmer in hand, was hustled away from the area by police and men in dark suits.

The APEC operation is part of a wider assault on basic democratic rights under the guise of combatting terrorism. Since 2002, the federal and state governments have combined to impose a raft of measures that would have been previously unimaginable, such as detention without trial, the outlawing of selected political groups, semi-secret trials and far-reaching sedition laws.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact