

Australia: Police mobilised against high school students at APEC demonstration

Patrick O'Connor
6 September 2007

Police in the Australian state of New South Wales launched a major operation yesterday aimed at intimidating high school students protesting against the Iraq war and US President George Bush. Along with 20 other world leaders, Bush is in Australia for this week's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.

About 200 high school students participated in the Sydney demonstration, while smaller school walkouts were staged in other major cities, all in defiance of threats from police, state and federal politicians, and the state education departments. One school, North Sydney Girls' High, locked its gates and placed teachers in front of exits to prevent students from attending the demonstration.

Students' banners and slogans reflected their determination to defend their democratic rights. They included: "Not too young to protest", "We have the right to protest". Others called for an end to the Iraq war and condemned Bush as a war criminal and terrorist.

Police patrolled trains before the demonstration searching for protestors. Exploiting truancy legislation, officers stopped students and demanded their names, phone numbers, and schools. Students who later spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that the police aggressively asked what they planned to do and tried to deter them from attending the protest. Police apparently even telephoned students' high schools, and in at least one case encouraged the principal to suspend the protestors.

Two members of the Socialist Equality Party were questioned by police while travelling on a train into the city before the demonstration. An officer moving through the train saw leaflets that were later distributed (including "Join the International Students for Social Equality! Build an ISSE chapter at your college or high school!"). After demanding to be given a leaflet, the cop asked that the SEP members identify themselves and questioned whether they were on the list of "excluded persons" banned from entering large parts of central Sydney. The SEP members refused to comply with the interrogation and asked the officer to explain the legal basis for her questioning.

"We are patrolling trains for protestors," the officer replied, implying that attendance at a demonstration was a suspicious, if not illegal, act.

Unprecedented legislative and security measures have been enacted for the APEC summit. A five-kilometre long and 2.8 metre high steel fence has been erected around sections of central Sydney. In the past few days several people, including visiting tourists, have been stopped and questioned by police for photographing the fence. Police have demanded that photos taken with digital cameras be deleted, and media personnel have been warned to stay away.

In the wider areas of Sydney declared "APEC security areas", police

have been given unchecked powers to stop and search people without warrant. Those on the "excluded persons list" are banned from entering these areas and face up to two years imprisonment if they do.

The main APEC protest, due to be held on Saturday, was originally planned to include a march through part of a "security area", but in a highly undemocratic ruling, the NSW Supreme Court yesterday backed legal action brought by police to ban the proposed route. The demonstration is still scheduled to proceed, but with a different route.

Stephen Cullen, commander of the Public Order and Riot Squad, told the court that: "Police lines will come under attack and a full-scale riot is probable." In reality, those most likely to provoke violence at the planned demonstration are the police themselves.

At yesterday's demonstration, the students marched through the city, but did not attempt to enter the so-called security areas. The protest was entirely peaceful, despite earlier lurid predictions by the media and the police, and a campaign of vilification led by Labor politicians. Last month NSW Labor Premier Morris Iemma condemned the protest organisers as "feral groups" and senior police warned they could not "guarantee" students' safety. Federal Labor leader Kevin Rudd also weighed in. "I would strongly suggest that kids stick to their books," he declared. "This is not a time for kids to get mixed up in protest activity."

Rudd's remarks underscored the bipartisan character of the current assault on democratic rights. In conditions of escalating social inequality, the chasm separating ordinary working people from the establishment parties is widening ever further. Committed to a program of militarism and war, governments internationally are abrogating democratic rights and preparing new repressive forms of rule.

None of these issues was raised by the organisers of the student rally. The main speakers, from the middle class radical organisation, Socialist Alliance, and its youth group, Resistance, sought to restrict discussion to the lowest political level. Bush and Howard were denounced in demagogic and frequently puerile terms, but no mention was made of the critical political role played by the Democrats in the US and the Labor Party in Australia in enabling the criminal US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq to proceed. Nor was there any discussion about an independent and socialist perspective against war. Instead, students were encouraged to protest in order to pressure the political establishment.

A different note was struck by one invited speaker, former US Marine Matt Howard, who served two terms in Iraq. Howard stressed the need for young people to study history and examine the real record in the Middle East. Young soldiers sent to Iraq were "robbed of history," he said. "We were told we were invading a backward

society.” He said the Bush administration had instigated a civil conflict in Iraq, where there had never before been a Shiite-Sunni civil war.

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed a number of the student participants.

Julian Wymer and Amy Barley, both 16, attended together with several other students from Picton High.

“There were three police who got us as soon as we got off the train and then another pair of police as soon as we got outside the station,” Julian said. “They told us to line up against the wall. Two of them were then singling out one person at a time so they’d have an advantage and be able to intimidate us. When someone else tried to go over there [where the police were speaking to the student] they were quite forceful and yelled at us and told us to go stand up against the wall, as if we’d done something wrong. We had to give our names, phone numbers, schools, ages.

“The police asked us what we were doing. It’s like, what does it look like we’re doing? We are here to protest against this sort of behaviour... The police then called our principal. They said that it was up to the principal; it’s her discretion what the disciplinary action would be but that they would suggest suspension and possible detentions as well.”

Asked why they were at the protest, Amy replied, “You wouldn’t let a murderer walk into your home so why should we welcome Bush into the country? It’s wrong. It’s not anti-American either. George Bush doesn’t represent America—over 60 percent of the United States does not agree with his policy on the Iraq war.”

“It’s not America we have the problem with, it’s George Bush himself and the war in Iraq,” Julian added. “To stop students from protesting isn’t right, because it’s a person’s right, responsibility even, to protest. In about a year or two we’ll have the right to vote. They’re stopping us from expressing our political views and saying we’re too young to have them, but within a year’s time we’re going to be voting, so if we’re not allowed to have political views now then what are going to do when we have to vote?”

The WSWS asked about the lies used to justify the invasion of Iraq. “The weapons of mass destruction thing I don’t understand because America sold weapons to Iraq and Iran for their war,” Julian replied. “They supposedly invaded a country for having weapons of destruction—but they sold them the weapons of mass destruction... If they were fighting against terrorism and against weapons of mass destruction they should be fighting themselves...”

Amy added: “It’s meant to be a war on terrorism but they are blowing up thousands of innocent people daily. It’s a complete contradiction and no-one’s agreeing with it anymore.”

Ben, 18, was part of a group of about 10 students from St Mary’s Senior High School in Sydney’s western suburbs.

He was critical of state Premier Morris Iemma for describing anti-APEC demonstrators as “ferals”. “There are no feral animals here,” he commented. “We are all humans. These are the true people here. I came to the rally to protest against George Bush and his ridiculous war in Iraq. The war is basically to exploit the oil and all the other natural resources of countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, only to further the capitalist governments such as America, Britain and Australia.

“I’m also here against climate change. I’m opposed to Australia’s and America’s failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol, which would be just a first step. My other main concern is indigenous rights, and John Howard’s military and police intervention into the Northern Territory.

“Sydney has been turned into a police-state pretty much, with all the police and FBI agents. It’s just because John Howard wants to win the next election, and doesn’t want anyone speaking out against him. But the Labor Party has the same views. There’s no difference between them. What good is Rudd going to do for workplaces and indigenous people? It’s a little sad that people think voting for Kevin Rudd will make any difference.”

Fatima, 20, is a student at TAFE Meadowbank. She told the WSWS that her younger sister had been warned by the school principal not to attend and her brother had been unable to come due to concern about the police patrols on the train.

“We don’t want George Bush here, we want the troops out of Iraq,” she said. “They’ve killed so many people there, brought destruction, and there’s no democracy. My parents came to Australia from Lebanon; they left to get away from the war, which America supported. I went back to Lebanon last year, just after the war, and the destruction I saw... My grandmother’s house, she lives on her own, and I had to help put the windows back up, all the glass was broken. It was all because of America, they supplied all the weapons to Israel. So the Bush administration just wants to destroy the world, there’s no democracy, it’s not a free world anymore.

“I think they’re trying to get closer to Iran. They’ve gone into Afghanistan and Iraq which both border Iran. The US wants to be the superpower of the world, dominating every country. I think that’s the whole point, the whole purpose.”

Chandi Bates and Sam Kidd, both 15, attend Fort Street High School. “George Bush just shouldn’t be here and we don’t support the war in Iraq,” Chandi said.

“We don’t want him to feel welcome here and we want to make him know that people aren’t happy with him and what he’s done,” Sam added. “We oppose the Iraq war and we know about the 2000 election, where he rigged it and ignored all the votes from the poor black people in Florida.”

Asked what he thought of the Democrats in the US and potential presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Sam replied: “I don’t think there is much of an alternative in the US or in Western politics anywhere, like a left alternative.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact