Massive police-state mobilisation for Sydney APEC demonstration

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The unprecedented operation mounted by New South Wales police against an antiwar demonstration held in Sydney on Saturday marks a new stage in the bipartisan assault on democratic rights carried out under the banner of the "war on terror".

The scaffolding has been erected for an Australian police state through a series of "anti-terror" legislation passed by federal and state governments—and this was on display on the weekend. At least 1,000 heavily armed police were mobilised, together with snipers, riot squads armed with tear gas, undercover agents, water cannons, and buses converted into "mobile prisons".

The Howard government, and its state Labor counterparts, deemed this necessary to deal with a peaceful protest of about 10,000 people against the Iraq war and US President George Bush, who was in Sydney for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. The police mobilisation made clear that the entire APEC security operation, which was budgeted to cost $330 million and involved about 5,000 police and soldiers, had nothing to do with any alleged terrorist threat. It was instead aimed at creating a climate of intimidation and fear, and at suppressing any expression of opposition to the meetings involving Bush, his fellow war criminal Australian Prime Minister John Howard, and 19 other world leaders.

That Saturday's demonstration did not see any large-scale clashes between police and protestors was solely due to the determination of those present not to be provoked by the cops.

The police operation could hardly have been more provocative. Lines of "mobile prison" buses blocked off roads adjacent to the initial rally site, along with a three-officer deep police line. Hundreds of police stood on both sides of the road along the march route. More encircled Hyde Park, where the rally finished, with only a small entry point left unblocked. At one point, a police line—whose sole purpose seemed to be to provoke a clash—hemmed in protestors along a street adjacent to the park. Many demonstrators, including the elderly and parents with children, were forced to climb over a metre-high wall to enter the park even though steps leading into the rally area were just a few metres away, blocked off by the police cordon.

A police helicopter flew overhead throughout the rally, while a police mobile water cannon was deployed to several areas. Individuals, almost certainly undercover police, dressed in dark clothing and with masks over their faces, moved through the crowd separately from the small group of genuine protestors who describe themselves as anarchists. Police permitted a small number of pro-Bush counter-demonstrators alongside the protest, while a highly dubious group of masked men in dark clothing calling themselves "National Anarchists" attempted to participate. Demonstration organisers said they did not know whether these were neo-Nazis or police, and warned protestors not to be provoked.

Witnesses recorded many instances of police violence. While 18 people were arrested, of whom 14 were charged—including one man for allegedly throwing a dart and assaulting an officer with a metal bar—this alleged incident had nothing to do with the bulk of police actions.

Dale Mills, a co-ordinator with Human Rights Monitors, took more than 100 photographs of police without identification. "They took ID badges off so they could not be identified before committing acts of aggression," he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

According to the *Herald*, an American journalist from Getty Images was pushed to the ground and dragged by police and a freelance photographer, Graham Prichard, was arrested and charged after refusing to stop filming police during the protest. One TV news crew captured footage of an officer repeatedly punching a protestor, who was being held to the ground by other cops.

Many arrests took place on the flimsiest of pretexts, including offensive language and indecent exposure. Other people were hauled away for no apparent reason. At the beginning of the march, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters witnessed about ten cops move through the crowd and suddenly grab a person who was with the anarchist contingent, picking him up by the legs and arms and running behind the line of riot police.

According to Human Rights Monitor, two men were arrested after they used a pocket knife to cut a hole in their banner, which was getting caught in the wind. "When they rejoined the protest they were surrounded and arrested, [and] one bashed over the head by police with his banner pole," the observer reported. "An Irish lady beside me was telling me how she'd lived in Belfast in the eighties and that, 'at the height of The Troubles no-one ever saw as many police as this'."

Many police officers, no doubt encouraged by the lurid predictions of a riot issued by senior politicians and the media, were clearly agitated and eager to attack.

Under special APEC legislation introduced by the New South Wales Labor government, police were given sweeping powers within designated areas including much of central Sydney, the airport, and other sections of the city affected by the summit. No part of the protest, however, fell within the "security areas".

After the demonstration had concluded, police illegally arrested two people, Paddy Gibson and Dan Jones, who were among those on an "excluded persons" list. So-called excluded persons are banned from entering "security areas", and face up to two years' imprisonment if they do. Police can ban an unlimited number of people, who have no right of appeal.

Gibson and Jones—who were placed on the list because of their role in organising the APEC demonstrations—were arrested on charges of entering a so-called security area while they were in Hyde Park—not a designated security area. Once the speeches ended, police moved in and carried the two men away. Three other people who protested the illegal arrests were themselves detained for hindering police and other offences. While Gibson and Jones were later released, those who defended them still face charges.

The indiscriminate character of the police actions was demonstrated on Friday, when Greg McLeay, a 52-year-old accountant, was violently

tackled to the ground by four officers and arrested in front of his 11-year-old son for allegedly jaywalking in central Sydney. He was released after spending the night in custody. "You want your children to grow up respecting the police but how can they when they see this kind of thing?" McLeay complained. The arrest was widely condemned, including by McLeay's friend, a right-wing columnist Miranda Devine for the *Sun-Herald.*

Despite the blatantly illegal character of the police actions, they were hailed by senior government figures. Labor Premier Morris Iemma, praised police for an "outstanding job".

The entire affair underscores the absence of any constituency for the defence of democratic rights within the Australian political establishment. As in the US, Britain, Europe, and other parts of the world, long-established constitutional norms and legal rights are being torn up. Amid escalating social inequality and a growing divide between the agenda of the official establishment and the interests and sentiments of ordinary working people, new authoritarian forms of rule are being developed. The APEC police-military operation has provided a foretaste.

Police commissioner Andrew Scipione indicated as much when he defended police tactics at Saturday's demonstration. "That's the way that we do business in NSW now," he declared.

Many of those attending the demonstration did so in conscious defiance of the police and media scare campaign. Banners included: "How does taking away my rights and freedoms protect my rights and freedoms?", "Be alert, be alarmed! Freedom of speech is under attack", "Cheap scare tactics can't silence my voice", "NSW Police state", and "War is terrorism".

Members of the Socialist Equality Party and International Students for Social Equality distributed copies of the SEP statement, "Socialist strategy needed to oppose war and social inequality". The leaflet emphasised the necessity for the working class to adopt an independent perspective against war and militarism and defence of democratic rights and living conditions.

"A recognition of the objective social and economic driving forces behind a new period of war leads to just one conclusion: the struggle against war cannot be organised on the basis of protests to the ruling classes and their governments," the statement read. "Rather, it must be conducted on the basis of an international socialist strategy aimed at the unification of the working people of the world in the overthrow of the capitalist profit system and its anachronistic nation-state framework."

An entirely different political perspective was provided by the protest organisers, the Stop the War Coalition, which is dominated by the Socialist Alliance. They sought to bolster lingering illusions that the Labor Party represents an alternative to the Howard government's agenda, arguing that electing a Labor government at the upcoming federal elections would mark a step forward in the struggle against war.

Distributing a leaflet headed, "Boot out Howard to get the troops out", the Stop the War Coalition declared: "Now we [the antiwar movement] must be part of Howard's defeat. We need ALP leader Kevin Rudd and the rest of the country to understand that this election is the turning point for Australia's support for the carnage in Iraq, and an incoming Rudd government will must [sic] be forced to break decisively with Howard's legacy."

An incoming Labor government will, in fact, be forced to do no such thing. Rudd has made clear his full support for the "war on terror", Australia's alliance with US imperialism, and the ongoing occupation of Iraq by US forces. Rudd plans to withdraw Australia's combat troops, which represent only a fraction of the total Australian personnel in Iraq and the Gulf, without any deadlines and in close collaboration with US authorities so as not to cause any disruption to the occupation. The combat troops will then be redeployed to Afghanistan and East Timor, Solomon Islands, and other parts of the South Pacific.

That such an agenda is being presented by the Socialist Alliance as a step forward for the antiwar movement and the working class underscores its role as the left flank of the political establishment.

WSWS reporters spoke with a number of people attending Saturday's demonstration.

Joe Ventura, a Macquarie University student originally from Georgia in the US, said: "I'm here to protest the policies represented by my country and the Bush administration, which are misguided, ill conceived and in many cases criminal, especially with regard to the war and occupation of Iraq. We wanted to give our voices to the march and give it some more legitimacy by the numbers here."

"I've seen it all before," he said when asked about the APEC security measures. "Georgia hosted the G8 some years ago and our city, Savannah, was turned into a virtual military state overnight. There were police with M16s on virtually every street corner, snipers on the rooftops and so on. Of course, having seen it all before doesn't make it any less shocking or legitimate. This wall in Sydney city, which is a show of power and has nothing to do with protecting politicians from terrorism, is pretty unique. This is very costly and is money that could be used in much more productive ways."

Asked about the Labor Party's complicity in attacking democratic rights he said: "I see the same thing in my country with the Democratic Party and although this is sad it doesn't really surprise me. At this point the Democrats are the only alternative even though I don't really believe it is much of an alternative."

"I think the police tried really hard to keep people away and it may have partially worked," Toby, a 39-year-old carpenter told the WSWS. "They, including the Labor Party, hate people coming out on the streets. For me it's just that the ruling class are going to stay the ruling class and anything that gets people onto the streets has to be squashed. It's all about scaring people away.

"I'm here today, well you know, to fight for a better world. And that's about a world where everyone has dinner on the table and everyone gets a fair go. Things are getting a bit fascist in Australia these days. A lot of people look back at fascism and think it's all past history, that we got over that and now it's all alright. But the danger is real. It's not going to take its old form, but the police state can come back and it is. People have to be wise to the threat."

A physicist, who wished to remain anonymous, said: "I'm a scientist and at the beginning could see that there might be a problem with weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But I believed what the government, here and in the US, said, and thought it was true and factual. It turned that this information was false, incorrect and manufactured for a particular political purpose thereby negating the reason for having scientists supposedly analysing information in an unbiased fashion.

"Because of this fundamental removal of trust I no longer support the political system we live under and want to become involved in some form of action to deal with this. The security build up is ridiculous. Our money is being wasted on this and as you can see everyone here is peaceful. Why is this all necessary? It is not only the APEC issue that I'm protesting against but any event which maintains this system."

Shay, a young man from Iran, was participating in his first protest since coming to Australia three years ago. "Mainly I'm here to say that I am against Bush," he said. "I am totally against the war on Iraq, which could spread to Iran. War is only ever justified if someone attacks you. This whole thing of pre-emptive war or war against terrorism is wrong. War itself is terrorism. If you go to a country, kill people, and then claim you are spreading democracy to put down a dictator, then you are a dictator too."

Asked what was behind the war, he replied: "Money is behind this war. They attacked Iraq because of the oil, and it could be Iran next. The US said it went to Iraq because of weapons of mass destruction, but they

didn't find any. Now they are saying Iran is going to get nuclear bombs. They are going to attack Iran and I am sure they won't find any nuclear weapons, but they will just cover it up...

"The police operation is ridiculous. This is my city and I should be allowed to go anywhere. Australia is not a free society—not this week at least. It looks more like a third world country... We have to stop electing people who are pro-war. But Labor and Liberal are the same. It's all about money and power. Whoever has the money rules the vote."

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