

Australia: Labor government introduces draconian police powers for Pope's visit

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By executive order, the NSW Labor government of Premier Morris Iemma has introduced sweeping police powers to suppress democratic rights and civil liberties during this month's Catholic World Youth Day event in Sydney.

World Youth Day—the largest event to take place in Sydney since the 2000 Olympic Games—will see an estimated 200,000 Catholic pilgrims from around the world converge on the city for a week-long program from July 15-20. It will culminate in an address at Randwick Racecourse by Pope Benedict XVI.

The event will see much of Sydney transformed into a virtual fortress. On every level, from the event's funding and organisation through to the extraordinary powers handed to police for its duration, basic democratic principles, including separation of church and state, are being trampled, with the state Labor government acting as a virtual arm of the Vatican.

Rushed through by executive order on Friday June 27, the *World Youth Day Amendment Regulation 2008*, gives NSW police, State Emergency Services and fire crew the power to arrest and fine demonstrators for behaviour causing “annoyance” or “inconvenience” to WYD pilgrims. Those in breach can be fined \$5,500.

An amendment to the World Youth Day Act 2006, the regulation was signed into law by Governor Marie Bashir on the advice of Deputy Premier and former Police Minister John Watkins, thereby circumventing even the minimal public scrutiny attending a legislative amendment.

The regulation establishes more than 600 “controlled areas” throughout Sydney. Police in controlled areas have the right to search citizens, their vehicles and personal belongings and to arrest and fine those whose actions may be deemed offensive to pilgrims. Anyone failing to comply with a search request will be refused

entry.

Large parts of Sydney will be covered by the regulation's “control” provisions. These include some 500 Catholic and state schools, tertiary institutions (including the University of Sydney and University of New South Wales), public transport hubs, parks (including the Royal Botanic Gardens and Hyde Park) and cultural and sporting venues (including the Art Gallery of NSW, Randwick Racecourse, State Theatre and the Sydney Opera House).

In addition to controlling freedom of movement, the regulation controls what may be “sold or distributed” in declared areas, providing potential scope for police suppression of leaflets, political literature and other paraphernalia. In what amounts to a massive protection racket for the Catholic Church's official merchandising activities, police can prevent the sale of items-including religious icons-which have not been approved by the state government's World Youth Day Authority.

Across all declared areas and their immediate surrounds, the regulation empowers the state government to remove any advertising that may give offence to WYD participants. The regulation controls airspace for the same purpose.

The new laws have provoked overwhelming public outrage. A poll conducted this week by the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed 90 percent of respondents opposed the measures. Metropolitan newspapers and internet blogs have been deluged with letters attacking the regulation's draconian provisions.

During last September's APEC meeting of world leaders in Sydney, the Iemma government locked down large parts of the city, establishing police check-points and exclusion zones and providing for police detention without presumption to bail for those arrested during the event. Media and government attempts to justify

these measures were met with widespread public scepticism and anger.

Since 2001, the state Labor government has been at the forefront of federal and state government efforts—using the pretext of the fraudulent “war on terror”—to suppress basic democratic rights. In the case of the WYD regulation, all such pretence has been swept aside. The Iemma government has assumed an openly authoritarian role for the express purpose of outlawing freedom of speech and movement in defence of one of the world’s most powerful and reactionary institutions.

The Iemma government’s World Youth Day spokeswoman Kristina Kenneally has claimed the police powers granted under the terms of the WYD regulation are “no different to the powers they have at any other large event”. These claims have been rejected by legal experts who point to the unprecedented, expansive and subjective character of the new regulation that makes any behaviour causing “annoyance” or “inconvenience” to WYD pilgrims a criminal offence.

Anna Katzmann, president of the NSW Bar Association, said the regulations were far less defined than other “annoyance” or “inconvenience” legislation. In the Sydney Cricket and Sports Ground Act, for example, people must be “disorderly or insulting” before they can be removed.

Deputy Police Commissioner David Owens has said police will exercise their “discretion” in the determination of an offence. But under the terms of the regulation, police must assume the standpoint of “annoyed” or “inconvenienced” pilgrims. In this way police power is wielded in defence of a religious world outlook against those protesting, for example, the Vatican’s opposition to stem-cell research, or its role in blocking the spread of contraception in HIV/AIDS-ravaged Africa.

If the state government can introduce measures today criminalising protest against the Catholic Church, what is to stop the passage of similar regulations tomorrow criminalising action causing “annoyance” to other powerful and vested interests?

Organisations planning protests during WYD have publicly condemned the regulation’s powers.

Chris McIsaak, president of Broken Rites Australia, which represents thousands of victims of church sexual

abuse, told the *World Socialist Web Site* her organisation was visited on July 1 by members of a newly-established World Youth Day Investigation Team within the State Crime Command of NSW Police. They instructed her group that proposed banners for any protest, along with the wording of any t-shirts and placards would have to be submitted to police for approval. They would then be vetted by a World Youth Day Authority “panel” composed of police, state government and Catholic Church officials.

Attempts by the *World Socialist Web Site* to confirm procedures for the vetting of protest materials were met with official stonewalling.

“I really feel that I’m in a very surreal world at the moment,” McIsaak told the WSWS. “I always assumed you had the right to be there and have your say but we’re not in a free society anymore by the looks of things.”

Effectively the pope’s World Youth Day (inaugurated by pope John Paul II in 1984) has become a state-sponsored event. Despite the Catholic Church being the wealthiest organisation in the world—and the largest property owner—the Iemma government will foot the bulk of the event’s estimated \$150 million cost. This includes \$40 million in state and federal grants to reserve Randwick Racecourse for a giant papal mass.

It is inconceivable that such state support would be forthcoming for a visit from the head of the Islamic or Jewish denominations. The backing given by the Iemma government for WYD reflects the enormous economic clout wielded by the Catholic Church. According to a report compiled by the *Business Review Weekly* in 2005, the Catholic Church owns some \$100 billion in assets across Australia, with \$16.2 billion in annual revenue—tax free.



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