G20 Review Boards set to whitewash Toronto police-state tactics

Carl Bronski
3 August 2010

In the wake of the wholesale suppression of democratic rights during the G20 meetings in Toronto in late June, no less than three governmental "reviews" of police conduct have been set up by provincial and municipal authorities to investigate the circumstances surrounding the mass arrest of over a thousand protestors at the global summit.

However, anyone holding out the slightest hope that the Ontario government's Ombudsman, the Toronto Police Services Board and the freshly minted Office of the Independent Police Review Directorate will be anything less than a whitewash of the police state tactics loosed on the streets of Toronto during the summit will be sorely disappointed.

Before and during the week of protests that accompanied the G20, protestors were bludgeoned, kicked, tear gassed, trampled by police horses and shot at with rubber and plastic bullets. Homes were raided for "preventative arrests" without a warrant. Journalists covering these unprecedented events were arrested and assaulted.

Demonstrators were hauled into detention cages, strip searched and denied legal counsel. There, detainees suffering from concussion and deep lacerations were denied medical attention. A diabetic entering into shock was denied treatment for four hours.

The "kennel" as it was dubbed by police guards, was crammed with people arrested for such egregious offences as carrying "dangerous weapons" such as protest signs and noise-makers. Smokers carrying lighters have been accused of possessing "incendiary devices". Youth with the temerity to wear black clothing have been swept up by the police dragnet in a program dubbed "catch and release" by rank-and-file cops.

In one particularly provocative action, hundreds of heavily armed riot police corralled some 200 people Sunday night at a downtown street-corner, forcing them to stand in a driving thunderstorm for four hours. This "kettling operation" detained not only youth demonstrating against the G20, but commuters heading home from weekend shopping, dozens of citizens departing from World Cup soccer celebrations, journalists covering the police build-up and entire families residing in the area. The scenes of drenched and shivering people, crying children and distressed family pets struck a deep chord amongst broad layers of the city's populace.

The Toronto Police Services review, the first of the three commissioned review panels, cannot examine individual police conduct or overall operational issues and is mandated only to investigate "the structure of decision-making" between the various municipal, provincial and federal police forces mobilized to provide security for the G20 leaders.

The Board, said Chairman Alok Mukherjee, can only act as a "post office" for individual complaints, sending them off to other agencies. "We were out of the (police) loop", said Mukherjee, despite personally being at police headquarters when the police operation against the demonstrators was in full swing. When confronted by deputations of civil liberties lawyers and aggrieved citizens at a post-G20 board meeting, the chairman asserted, "A deputation is not a personal complaint. People may have misunderstood because of some of the comments that were made that they were able to come to the board and in public talk about what happened to them as individuals".

The second review, under the auspices of the Ontario provincial Ombudsman, is only authorized to look at the circumstances around a secret law passed by the Ontario Liberal government cabinet in early June that gave police seemingly special powers of arrest inside the perimeter fence that surrounded the G20 conclave. That Order-in-Council was not publicized by the government and was not announced to the public until a press conference given by Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair at the beginning of the summit week in late June.

Blair announced, however, that the law entitled his officers to search and demand identification from anyone "within 5 metres of the perimeter fence" on pain of arrest. In fact, the law only provided for such actions against citizens inside the fenced perimeter. Despite vocal complaints from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, Premier Dalton McGuinty and his community safety minister, Rick

© World Socialist Web Site

Bartolucci, scrupulously kept out of the public eye for the entire week, refusing to contradict the chief. Last week, when environmentalist Dave Vasey—who was arrested outside the perimeter—appeared to answer his court summons, he was told that no record of any charges against him appeared on the court docket or in any computer system. Police spokeswoman Meaghan Gray explained that there must have been some "administrative error", and that the arresting officers were unavailable for comment.

This has not been the only instance of police prevarication. Toronto police denied that they fired rubber bullets at peaceful protestors until photographic evidence of wounds inflicted by the projectiles was publicized. And when displaying a table full of "weapons" allegedly confiscated from protestors, police featured prominently a chainsaw and cross-bow taken from a schizophrenic man who had nothing to do with the G20 demonstrations, chain mail from a hapless citizen walking to a Dungeons and Dragons activity, goggles, bike helmets, gas masks, walkie-talkies and a Swiss Army knife.

The police—abetted by the mainstream press—have used such images to promote the fiction that the tens of thousands of people who demonstrated in the streets were guilty of "rioting" and "vandalism", i.e., actions carried out by the 50 to 70 self-styled anarchists who damaged a few police cars and shop windows after police blocked a peaceful march. To date, police officials have refused to comment on how many agent provocateurs were deployed by them inside the anarchist ranks.

The third panel, the Office of the Independent Police Review Directorate, is mandated to investigate complaints against individual police actions. The directorate has the right to dismiss complaints outright or to refer the matter to the chief of police in question if the complaint relates to police policy or services. A spokesperson for the directorate stated that the majority of complaints will be investigated by police because they have more resources, "but our oversight role continues. We can make sure the complaint is handled in a way that is transparent, efficient and fair to police and public". To date, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association has lodged five complaints with the directorate alleging that police actions contravened the criminal code and violated charter rights.

In order to effectively pursue complaints against individual police officers, aggrieved citizens must be able to provide badge numbers or names. However, many of those arrested and brutalized have stated that police, in contravention of policy, removed their identification prior to confrontations with demonstrators. Further, since dozens of different police forces marshaled from across the country were deployed on the streets of Toronto during the G20, jurisdictional rules can derail a complainant's action.

Despite the public outcry from broad layers of the population against the police state methods unleashed at the G20, both federal Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Ontario Premier McGuinty have refused to convene a more all encompassing public inquiry. For their own part Toronto City Council, led by social democratic Mayor David Miller, voted 36–0 to "commend outstanding police work".

No faith should be placed in the deliberations of the various agencies commissioned to review the actions of the police in Toronto in the last week of June. The violence and repression carried out by Canadian authorities was worthy of a police state. An army of security officers, both in uniform and undercover, took over the downtown portion of Toronto, a major world city, creating conditions of martial law.

The police operation was used to violently repress an overwhelmingly peaceful protest by thousands of people opposed to the policies of the governments represented at the summit. Even prior to the demonstration, police preemptively arrested alleged leaders of the protest. The massive state operation was a brazen assault on basic free speech and assembly rights.

The events in Toronto are a serious warning. The level of official violence is being ratcheted up. In the face of the upheavals to come, the state in every country is working up plans for mass repression. What dominates the politics and social relations of every country is the global economic crisis, which has reached an advanced stage. All the emphasis must now be placed on the development of a consciously socialist and internationalist movement of the working class, the only progressive response to the police state provocations and violence of the ruling elites.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site