

Major parties outbid each other on law and order

Richard Phillips, SEP candidate for Bankstown
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Behind the “law and order” bidding competition between the major parties over police numbers, resources and new laws in the New South Wales state election campaign lie preparations for further repressive measures against workers and youth.

Premier Kristina Keneally vowed that, if re-elected, her government would deliver 360 extra police officers, expanding the NSW Police Force to a record 16,166 officers. Having already boosted police numbers by more than 3,000 since 1995—and doubled their salaries—the Labor government also pledged to introduce more police powers and tougher criminal sentences. It will provide police officers with 25 mobile command units, six mobile forensic command vehicles and new tasers for general policing. Local councils would be funded to install more than 300 new CCTV cameras, stepping up the surveillance of suburban streets.

Opposition leader Barry O’Farrell responded by declaring that a Liberal Party government would fund an extra 550 officers, taking the total to 16,356 by June 2014. He pledged 100 more highway patrol officers, 131 new vehicles and a new counter-terrorism helicopter. The Liberals also plan to return “drunk and disorderly conduct” to the Summary Offences Act, returning to police their notorious powers to arrest allegedly “disorderly” people at will.

After Labor took office in NSW in 1995, initially under Premier Bob Carr, it spearheaded the use of “tough on crime,” and later “war on terrorism,” demagogic to build up the state apparatus. Carr pioneered the demonising of Middle Eastern and Asian workers and youth, setting up specialised police “crime squads” to specifically harass and victimise them.

This offensive rightly provoked anger and hostility against Labor in immigrant working-class areas, such as Bankstown. The Carr government blamed youth and their parents—especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—for the social problems produced by falling living standards, attacks on working conditions, and Labor’s rundown of public schools, hospitals and other services. It worked to whip up unsubstantiated fears of ethnic “crime waves” to help justify unprecedented police powers.

Repressive laws targeted working-class youth in particular—for example, the doubling of imprisonment penalties for graffiti “vandalism” and possession of graffiti implements. The Labor government enacted legislation to allow police to stop, interrogate and search people on the streets, set up general roadblocks and search all vehicles, impose curfews on youth and order anyone in a public place to “move on”.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, Labor joined with the federal Howard Liberal government and other state Labor administrations in seizing upon the “war on terror” to introduce a range of new laws, including various forms of detention without trial. NSW police were given powers to secretly search homes and offices, as well as extended powers to bug suspects continuously for up to three months. Covert search warrants permitted police to seize possessions, copy documents and hack into computers.

These anti-democratic laws were accompanied by intensified anti-Muslim and anti-Arab rhetoric. Following the 2005 riot at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla, where a racist mob, whipped up by government anti-Muslim rhetoric and urged on by right-wing media commentators, assaulted people of Middle

Eastern appearance, the state government called an emergency parliamentary session to pass laws to allow police to declare “lockdown zones,” close off streets, erect checkpoints, conduct random searches and seize vehicles. The laws were aimed, not at the instigators of the riot, but at its victims.

On repeated occasions, the Labor government has mobilised heavily-armed police to confront outbreaks of discontent triggered by police violence. This was done against indigenous youth in Redfern in 2004 and Dubbo in 2006, and working-class youth at Macquarie Fields in 2005. There have also been numerous displays of police force, featuring riot squads, water cannon and dog squads, notably against anti-war and anti-capitalist demonstrators at the 2007 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Sydney.

The NSW election campaign underscores the fact that these measures will escalate, regardless of which party wins Saturday’s election. Opposition police spokesman Michael Gallacher scotched any suggestion that a Liberal government would abolish the Asian Crime Squad or the Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad, despite widespread antagonism toward them.

In 2009 the Liberal party supported Labor’s introduction, under the misleading banner of combatting “bikie gangs,” of powers to outlaw organisations and prosecute anyone who “associates” with them. The legislation, which incorporates key features of the anti-terrorism laws, including use of secret evidence and “control orders,” can be used against any organisation—including a political one—alleged to be involved in “serious criminal activity”.

Using virtually identical language, both O’Farrell and Keneally claim that their measures are directed at protecting ordinary people. “Families right across NSW deserve the right to feel safe—that’s why we’re boosting the number of cops on our streets,” Keneally said. O’Farrell said his plan was about “safe communities” and would address public concerns about “crime on the rise”.

This is a fraud. In reality, there is no evidence of increased crime. Many of the more than 10,000 people incarcerated in NSW prisons—a 40 percent rise in the last ten years—are serving six-month sentences for minor crimes, a by-product of endemic poverty and social oppression. According to recent statistics, 44

percent of Australian prisoners had been long-term unemployed, 13 percent had an intellectual disability and 60 percent did not complete Year 10.

The purpose of the “law and order” bidding war between the major parties is to justify boosting the state apparatus and diverting the attention of ordinary people away from the real sources of the social and economic problems they confront—the market-driven policies of both state and federal governments and, more fundamentally, the capitalist profit system itself.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained throughout the state election, the principal function of the police is to protect the corporate and financial elites against the growth of social discontent and resistance; the real target of the increasingly repressive laws is the working class and the youth.

The SEP insists that all measures used to spy on the population, criminalise political opposition, illegalise strikes, suppress demonstrations and censor the internet must be abolished, and all the police and spy agencies, including the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, disbanded.

Against the ongoing attempts to split and divide workers, the Socialist Equality Party fights for the unity of all working people—regardless of nationality, religion, skin colour or ethnic background—against racism, militarism and war; for the defence and extension of democratic rights; and for genuine social equality.



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