In wake of British riots, Australian government preparing for youth unrest

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Australian Federal Police (AFP) chief Tony Negus revealed on Monday that the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is actively discussing and making preparations to deal with riots similar to those that occurred in Britain last month.

Negus's statements were made during an ABC News 24 television interview on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US. After claiming, as usual, that there was a continued danger of terrorism in Australia, Negus almost immediately turned to concerns about civil unrest.

While the public is continually told that Australia is "insulated" from the global economic crisis, the political and security establishment is conscious and fearful of the politically explosive implications of mounting job cuts, inequality and social distress, and preparing to use similar repressive measures as their counterparts internationally.

The AFP chief stated: "There are a range of different communities who are feeling somewhat left out, and this is a very broad question for government in many ways, and the social issues attached to this, education issues and welfare and a range of other things."

He continued: "I wouldn't want to profile particular groups but there are young people in this country who are feeling disassociated with what's happening in a broader sense… and we've seen [that] just recently in London with the riots over there."

Negus added that he had "spoken to the prime minister personally about this. It's something she has a great interest in and we'll be doing our best to contribute to that whole of government response to make sure that we're appropriately ready here in Australia to prevent these things."

Negus was undoubtedly drawing conclusions from extensive intelligence reports produced within the AFP and the country's spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Since 9/11, mainly under the fraudulent banner of combating terrorism, the resources, powers and breadth of operations of ASIO and the AFP have been vastly expanded, a process which has been intensified by the Labor government. ASIO has tripled in size during the past decade, while between 2001 and 2009, the AFP expanded from 2,500 officers to 6,600.

Last month's British riots were initially triggered when police shot and killed Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old father of four, in the London suburb of Tottenham. Police blocked crowds from mourning Duggan's death, sparking unrest that was driven by broad social anger over unemployment, police violence and the deep assault underway on social services and living conditions.

The British ruling elite responded with police-state repression, including terrifying night-time raids on homes by armed police, and plans to arrest some 30,000 people. Courts have been operating 24-hours-a-day to ram through convictions, some against children as young as 11. Youth have been handed lengthy jail sentences for minor offences and for allegedly "inciting rioting" on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. (See: "What do the repressive measures imposed in the UK portend?")

Negus said he would be receiving advice from the British police on how to deal with riots. "We've got a liaison officer based in London working with the Metropolitan Police and I've certainly asked that he participate in debriefs in that country and provide whatever information they can back to us," he said. "I'll be providing the government with advice on that."

Despite official and mass media demonisation of the rioters as "barbarians" and a "feral underclass of

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criminals," the political establishment knows that the riots were the product of seething social discontent. The capitalist class and its security apparatus are also well aware that the British riots were only an initial, politically incoherent expression of this unrest.

Since the financial crash of 2007-2008, trillions of dollars have been handed to the major financial institutions by governments internationally. They are now forcing the working class to pay for this crisis, through cuts to social spending, basic infrastructure, public sector jobs, essential services such as health, education and cultural facilities, and workers' conditions.

Negus is not the first AFP chief commissioner to warn that the international economic meltdown would produce immense social unrest. In 2009, his predecessor Mick Keelty stated publicly that the greatest danger to national security was economic instability and discontent, not terrorism. "As the global financial crisis bites, it will increase feelings of marginalisation and isolation," he declared.

Negus's specific reference to young people is not accidental. Official youth unemployment in Australia is already over 16 percent, more than three times the overall jobless figure. This does not include the majority of young people who work in precarious and low-paid jobs in the retail and services industries. For decades, successive Labor and Liberal governments have presided over the destruction of thousands of full-time jobs, ending the prospect of a decent future for youth. Between 1988 and 2008, the proportion of young workers in part-time or casual employment increased from 37 percent to 70 percent—one of the highest rates in the world.

Far from benefiting the working class, Australia's "mining boom" has enriched only a tiny corporate elite. Retail and manufacturing, the largest areas of employment, have been hit by the elevated Australian dollar and falling consumer spending, with predictions that as many as 100,000 jobs will be slashed from the manufacturing sector by the end of this year.

In order to remain internationally "competitive," the Australian ruling class must impose on workers and youth cost-cutting measures no less draconian than those in Britain, across Europe and throughout the US. Negus's interview must be taken as a warning that the police and intelligence services, along with Gillard and the Labor government, are making preparations to suppress any protests or movement by working people against this austerity agenda.

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