

Australia: Silence on G20 lockdown at “Peoples Summit” forum on civil liberties

Mike Head

14 November 2014

A forum on civil liberties was convened on Wednesday as part of a three-day “Peoples’ Summit” being staged in Brisbane during the leadup to this weekend’s G20 summit in the Australian city. It provided a rather revealing glimpse of what passes for “opposition” by the various Greens, liberals, anarchists and pseudo-left groups involved.

Perhaps the most telling feature of the forum was that none of the speakers actually mentioned the full-scale assault on civil liberties and fundamental democratic rights underway in the city.

Brisbane is under virtual occupation by 6,000 police, backed by 2,000 military personnel, to prevent protests getting anywhere near the gathering of the world’s most powerful government and institutional leaders. The security forces have extensive special powers, including to conduct strip searches, order people to leave declared zones and make mass arrests. The lockdown is a testing ground for police-state conditions.

The silence from the speakers on this massive police-military operation, reputed to be the largest in Australian peacetime history, was all the more striking because at times they could barely be heard due to the noise of security helicopters hovering over the venue, in Brisbane’s West End.

Held in a church, the forum, entitled “Attacks on Civil Liberties and Democracy plus Spatial Politics and the Rights to the City,” was addressed by Brisbane barrister Stephen Keim and Griffith University law lecturer Chris Butler.

Keim confined his talk narrowly to the new Section 35P of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Act, which imposes jail terms of up to 10 years for anyone divulging information about an ASIO “special intelligence operation.”

These are undercover infiltrations of political parties or other groups by ASIO agents, often for the purpose of “sting” operations, in which these operatives provoke or entrap members of the organisation into allegedly plotting or preparing to commit a crime.

Section 35P went through parliament with the unanimous backing of the Abbott Liberal-National government, the Labor Party opposition and the Greens. It is just one of the many deeply anti-democratic and repressive aspects of the barrage of “anti-terrorism” legislation currently being imposed on the Australian population on the phony pretext of combating Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups.

While Keim suggested that members of the audience should be “critical and sceptical” of such laws adopted in the name of national security, his address actually covered over the essential thrust of Section 35P.

Echoing concerns voiced in sections of the corporate media, the barrister spoke only of the threat to journalists who might want to draw attention to a bungled operation by ASIO. He obscured the underlying thrust of Section 35P, which is to jail any member of a targeted group, particularly a socialist party, who exposes an ASIO spy or provocateur in its ranks.

Matters only got worse when Butler delivered an entire lecture on his topic: “Spatial Politics and the Rights to the City.” His purpose, he said, was to acquaint the audience with the work of Henri Levebre, a French ex-Stalinist philosopher who died in 1991.

It is not necessary here to delve into Butler’s obscure account of Levebre’s conceptions of how capitalism supposedly maintains its grip via “spatial politics.” Butler’s reason for trying to resuscitate Levebre’s theories soon became apparent.

The law lecturer urged the audience to embrace the notion of “resisting state power” via “self-management” and “progressive democratisation” within the existing structures—that is, within the framework of the capitalist state.

In an attempt to appear profound, Butler sought to equate this perspective with that advanced by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels of the “withering away of the state”. But he hastened to emphasise that he did not mean the “simplistic” view of Marx that this “withering away” took place after a socialist revolution, that is, after a genuine workers’ democracy had been established.

In reality, the police lockdown imposed on Brisbane for the G20 summit provided a graphic demonstration of the correctness of the Marxist analysis. As Marx and Engels emphasised, the capitalist state is an instrument of class rule, consisting “not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds.” Its purpose is to defend, at all costs, the interests of the capitalist class, which, in this period, requires a massive build-up of the state apparatus to suppress any opposition to its agenda of austerity and war.

That apparatus cannot be reformed from within. It must be overturned by the working class and replaced by a workers’ state, based on new genuinely democratic structures representative of the majority of the population. Only then can the state begin to “wither away.”

Butler, like Keim, received polite applause. It did not seem to occur to anyone that it was ludicrous to suggest “progressively democratising” the state when precisely the opposite was taking place. And, moreover, the boosting of the police-military apparatus and its powers were on open display in Brisbane.

Once question time began, this *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent pointed to the failure to even refer to the obvious show of force being conducted for the G20 summit. Still nothing was forthcoming from either speaker.

The forum chairman, Greg Brown, felt obliged to intervene, conceding that it was untenable to ignore what was happening all around the city. He limited himself to the complaint that the police had not “facilitated” planned G20 protests, but instead issued ultimatums and threats to those who applied for permits

to hold demonstrations.

The whole forum was a rather graphic illustration of the outlook of the organisers of the “Peoples’ Summit.” The silence on the massive security cordon surrounding the G20 is not accidental, but it reflects the fact that they accept the entire framework of the summit and the security measures surrounding it. They represent layers of the upper middle class who feel that their interests and concerns have been ignored and want to be heard by the powers-that-be. The implications of the massive build-up of the police-state apparatus for the working class are matter of complete indifference to them.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact