

Australian government orders police raids on union offices

Mike Head**26 October 2017**

In two highly-publicised raids, scores of Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers suddenly arrived at the Sydney and Melbourne offices of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) on Tuesday afternoon, executed search warrants, and carted away documents.

Australia increasingly resembles a police state, with stage-managed raids conducted for blatant political purposes. The pretext for the police operation was political donations made a decade ago, and officially recorded at the time, but allegedly not properly noted in AWU minutes.

Efforts are being made, at the highest levels of the state, to criminalise regular political activities such as making donations. The internal affairs of trade unions and political organisations are being subjected to massive surveillance and control.

As has become customary with police raids, including “counter-terrorism” operations, media outlets were alerted by the government, so television cameras were on hand to broadcast the images far and wide.

Employment Minister Michaelia Cash is now facing calls to resign, after falsely telling a Senate estimates committee last night on five occasions that neither she, nor her office, tipped off the media. “Quite frankly, I am offended on behalf of my staff as to those allegations,” Cash said at one point.

Cash even insisted she was not aware of Tuesday’s raid until she saw it on television. Later, after journalists exposed her claims, she recanted her testimony and announced that her senior media adviser, David De Garis, had resigned after admitting alerting journalists. De Garis has been made a fall guy for an affair that is now intensifying the crisis of the Liberal-National Coalition government.

A total of 32 police were involved in the raids, which came just three days before the High Court is due to decide tomorrow whether to disqualify seven members of parliament, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce.

Plainclothes AFP officers, some wheeling large cases, arrived at the AWU’s national office in Sydney at about 4.30pm and sealed off the 10th-floor headquarters in a

search for documents. Uniformed armed police stood guard outside the office.

Simultaneously, plainclothes officers, some holding AFP folders and wearing police badges, arrived in an unmarked car at the AWU’s Victorian state office in West Melbourne. AFP officers remained in the building for more than four hours, leaving at 9pm.

The raids were requested by the Turnbull government’s recently-created Registered Organisations Commission (ROC), a body with vast powers to pry into trade union affairs, including to conduct forced questioning of members, officials or anyone else.

In parliament yesterday, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull condemned suggestions that the government was using the police for political purposes, saying that was an attack on “the integrity of the Australian Federal Police.” But clearly the orders came from the government itself.

The raids were conducted just days after Cash referred the AWU to the ROC, following accusations splashed throughout the Murdoch media that, in 2005, the union gave \$100,000 to the lobby group GetUp! without the donation being authorised under union rules.

Murdoch’s *Australian* published similar allegations that the AWU, then led by Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, also gave money to his parliamentary election campaign and that of two other Labor candidates in 2007 without due authorisation.

The ROC claimed to have received a phone call that gave it “reasonable grounds” to suspect that relevant documents were “being concealed or destroyed.” Instead of ordering the AWU to produce the documents, using one of the commission’s many coercive powers, the ROC sent in the police.

The ROC raised the spectre of criminal charges. It said it was an offence for a person to engage in conduct “that results in the concealment, destruction or alteration of a document” relating to a ROC investigation. That offence is punishable by up to two years’ jail.

The raids set an anti-democratic precedent. Regardless of

the right-wing and pro-capitalist character of the AWU and the Labor Party, and GetUp! as well, the making of political donations is a basic democratic right that must be free of interference by the capitalist state apparatus.

Accusations of financial or organisational irregularities can become vehicles for far-reaching state intervention into political groups and parties, not just trade unions. If a union or any other group is allegedly breaching its rules, that is a matter for its members to deal with, not the police and government watchdogs.

Increasingly, official Australian politics has descended into mud-slinging and intrigue, backed by police operations, as both traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Coalition, pursue an agenda of slashing public services, intensifying war preparations and decimating working class jobs and conditions.

For more than three decades, successive governments have presided over widening social inequality, destruction of full-time jobs, worsening health, education and other key social services, and a lurch toward war as part of an ever-closer alignment with Washington. As a result, unprecedented social discontent and political disaffection has developed.

A growing pattern has emerged of governments orchestrating police investigations for political purposes. Last year, Turnbull's government called in the AFP to investigate Labor Party election text messages about the Medicare health insurance scheme. Leaks to the media about the disastrous performance of the National Broadband Network led to raids on Labor Party parliamentary offices.

From new military call-out provisions to the constant barrage of measures to boost the powers of the police and intelligence agencies, the government is desperately resorting to authoritarian methods amid a deepening political crisis of the entire parliamentary establishment.

By targeting Shorten, Turnbull's government, which faces being thrown from office when the next election is held, is stepping up the use of political smears to try to undermine its parliamentary opposition.

The targeting of GetUp! also points to deeply anti-democratic processes. The lobby group had previously acknowledged receipt of a donation of \$100,000 in 2005 from the AWU. GetUp! is a self-styled "independent" and "progressive" movement that seeks to put a participatory gloss on the existing political set-up and channel support to Labor and the Greens. As a result, it is coming under constant attack from the backers of the Liberal and National parties.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), under pressure from the government, recently announced that it was once again investigating whether GetUp! should be categorised as an "associated entity" of the Labor Party

under the federal electoral legislation. This would bring the organisation within the intrusive and extremely complex framework of reporting and monitoring imposed on political parties, and force it to lodge financial disclosure returns about donations it receives.

Both the AEC and ROC are like giant government octopuses, with tentacles covering every aspect of political and union organisations' affairs, right down to their constitutions, minutes books, membership lists and donation records. The ROC has powers to require people to answer questions behind-closed-doors, seize or force the handover of documents, and enter and search premises.

Any office-bearer of an organisation convicted of even "recklessly" failing to "exercise their duties in good faith in the best interests of the organisation or for a proper purpose" can be fined 2,000 penalty units (currently \$360,000) and/or jailed for five years.

The ROC began operations in May following last year's double dissolution election of all members of both houses of parliament. Turnbull's attempt to strengthen the position of the government backfired, leaving it with only a one-seat majority in the lower house and only 29 seats in the 76-member Senate.

However, after the election, backed by some of the right-wing populists elected to the Senate, the government pushed through parliament the two previously-blocked bills it had selected as the triggers for the election. One was to restore the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), which specialises in outlawing and punishing industrial action by construction workers. The other was to establish the ROC, with even more draconian powers.



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