

Australian spy chief reveals fascist networks, but minister attacks ‘left-wing lunatics’

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Extreme right-wing groups, capable of large-scale “sophisticated” violence, are increasingly active in Australia, the head of the country’s domestic intelligence agency reported this week. He revealed that their activity had been known to his agency “for some time.”

This statement by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Mike Burgess points to the rising danger of fascist, anti-immigrant attacks, similar to the shooting of nine people in Hanau, Germany on February 19 and the massacre of 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand last March 15.

“In Australia, the extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing,” Burgess stated in delivering ASIO’s annual threat assessment. “In suburbs around Australia, small cells regularly meet to salute Nazi flags, inspect weapons, train in combat and share their hateful ideology.”

The immediate response of Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who is in charge of ASIO, was to try to deflect attention from the far right, and insist that the threat of violence came equally from “left-wing lunatics” and “extreme left-wing ideologies.”

Dutton’s declaration underscores the fact that the real target of the government and the intelligence and police apparatus is left-wing and socialist organisations, not the revival of fascism. His crude attempt to demonise left-wing groups indicates the anxiety of the unstable and crisis-wracked Liberal-National Coalition government over the mounting social and political discontent.

Dutton’s intervention was deliberate, even though it appeared somewhat deranged. When a journalist asked if by left-wing terrorism he meant Islamist groups,

Dutton said: “Yes, I do and anybody in between.” He could not explain the connection between Islamic extremism and alleged left-wing violence, because there is none.

Burgess’s speech raises many questions about how much the spy and police agencies know about the operations and plans of far-right terrorists, which must involve ASIO surveillance or infiltration, and why these activities have not been reported to the public.

Burgess said Australians were signing up as members of international white supremacist hate groups such as The Base, where members use online platforms to share extremist right-wing ideologies and encourage each other into committing acts of violence.

“We expect such groups will remain an enduring threat, making more use of online propaganda to spread their messages of hate,” the ASIO chief said. “While we would expect any right-wing extremist-inspired attack in Australia to be low capability, i.e. a knife, gun or vehicle attack, more sophisticated attacks are possible.”

Last year, after an Australian white supremacist, Brenton Tarrant, killed 51 people and tried to murder another 40 at two mosques in Christchurch, it was revealed that he had personal connections with a fascist network in Australia, as well as alt-right and white racist groups across Europe and the US.

During a 10-month period in 2016–17, Tarrant made more than 30 comments on the then publicly-available Facebook pages of two Australian far-right groups, the United Patriots Front (UPF) and the True Blue Crew, both notorious for inciting hostility toward Muslims and other immigrants.

Burgess’s report again points to the still-unanswered

question of how Tarrant was able to proceed with his attack. In particular, did ASIO and other state agencies turn a blind eye to the plans of Tarrant and other fascists?

There are known to be close relations between the far-right groups and state agencies across Europe. In his manifesto, Tarrant boasted that “hundreds of thousands” of European soldiers and police belong to “nationalist groups.”

Moreover, these neo-fascists are being cultivated and encouraged by the xenophobic and nationalist policies of governments internationally, including in the US and Australia. Like Tarrant, the alleged Hanau gunman issued a document before his attack proclaiming his support for President Donald Trump.

The dangerous growth of the far-right in Germany, across Europe and internationally is not the result of broad popular support for the neo-Nazis, who are hated by the vast majority of the people. Rather, it is the result of efforts by the political establishment and the state apparatus to promote the far-right in response to the upsurge in the class struggle and rise in support for socialism around the world.

Just a week before the attack in Hanau, the WSWS published a critical Perspective, “Sound the alarm! Political conspiracy and the resurgence of fascism in Germany,” outlining the history behind the efforts of the German ruling elite to revive fascism.

Burgess’s speech was delivered at ASIO’s fortified Canberra headquarters, and before a large audience of intelligence officers and diplomats, that included members of the US-led Five Eyes global surveillance network. The ASIO chief did not specifically refer to left-wing organisations. But he claimed that Australia faced an unprecedented level of threat from “espionage and foreign interference.”

Burgess vowed to step up ASIO’s operations on this front, including by “actively supporting” prosecutions under the 2018 “foreign interference” laws, which would have a “chilling effect.”

As the WSWS has warned, these laws constitute an assault on basic democratic rights. They contain sweeping offences, ranging from treason to breaching official secrecy and collaborating with a “foreign” organisation. These provisions, while directed against anyone associated with China, could be used to criminalise whistle-blowing, anti-war activity and other

political dissent. The outlawed activities could extend to anyone opposing Australian involvement in a US-led military conflict with China.

Burgess did not name China as a supposed source of foreign interference, but in the context of the escalating anti-China campaign in the media, the implication was clear. He claimed that every “sector of our community” was being targeted, including parliament, government officials, media commentators, business leaders and universities. “Some of the tactics being used against us are so sophisticated, they sound like they’ve sprung from the pages of a cold war thriller,” he said, without providing any evidence for this incredible claim.

In reality, the chief and most dangerous source of foreign interference in Australia is the US government, which is demanding stepped-up participation by Australia in its potentially catastrophic economic and military confrontation with China.

In another major thrust of his speech, Burgess praised the new powers handed to ASIO, via the Assistance and Access Act, which he said ASIO was already using to compel internet companies to help it crack open encrypted communications. He declared that messaging apps and greater global connectivity carried a “dark side,” claiming that encryption had been encountered in 9 out of 10 “priority counter-terrorism cases.”

Over the past two decades, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike have vastly expanded the resources and powers of ASIO and the other intelligence and police agencies. A police-state framework was first assembled under the banner of the post-2001 “war on terrorism.” Burgess’s speech and Dutton’s response are a warning that this apparatus is being focused on the growth of social and political disaffection, particularly in the working class, while fascist forces are being cultivated to promote divisive anti-immigrant racism and above all to target socialists.



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