

Sweeping police measures against anti-WTO protests in Australia

By Mike Head
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Acting at the behest of the state Labor government, New South Wales police have taken extraordinary measures to block protests against a World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Sydney today and tomorrow. Street marches have been denied permits throughout downtown Sydney for five days—from November 13 to 17—and the WTO venue at Sydney Olympic Park has been turned into a virtual fortress, surrounded by steel and concrete barricades.

On the pretext of protecting the WTO delegates and the city's population from threats of violence and terrorism—none of which have been substantiated—the police have announced they will exercise sweeping powers introduced for the 2000 Olympics. At the meeting venue, they will herd anti-WTO protesters into two small “passive protest areas” and have threatened to confiscate banners and placards.

In a bid to intimidate demonstrators, 600 officers marshalled with 20 mounted police, two helicopters and 20 dogs at Olympic Park yesterday for a riot drill. Police spokesmen have warned that police and specialist officers will be armed with capsicum spray, batons and weapons and have been briefed to expect violence. Hundreds of police have been mobilised from across the state, including the para-military State Protection Group.

NSW Police Assistant Commissioner Dick Adams said there would be a strong police presence, featuring members of the dog and bomb squad. Declaring that police would only tolerate those wanting to demonstrate “passively and legally,” Adams sought to demonise protesters, saying they included “ratbags” and “the lunatic fringe”.

Adams admitted there was no intelligence to suggest a terrorist threat to the WTO talks but argued that the current international climate was a consideration in assessing risk. “One would be foolish not to take into account what happened in Bali and the current international climate,” he insisted.

Backed personally by Premier Bob Carr and Police Minister Michael Costa, the police have seized upon the October 12 Bali bombings to justify outlawing basic forms of political dissent.

Much of Olympic Park has been turned into an exclusion zone, surrounded by about three kilometres of perimeter fencing. The train station has been closed, bus services cancelled and tourists turned away. Businesses have been shut

down and all other activities halted, including marking of school exams. Despite early summer heat, the two “passive protest areas” have no shade, running water or toilets.

Under the Olympic Arrangements legislation introduced in 2000, people entering the Olympic Park can be searched, forcibly removed or issued orders by police, under threat of arrest. Police, “authorised persons” and “enforcement officers” (who may include security guards) can seize property, prevent the distribution of any material, stop the use of cameras, recording and broadcasting equipment, demand names and addresses and proof of identity and issue on-the-spot fines.

It is an offence to enter a barricaded area, use “indecent, obscene, insulting or threatening language,” behave in “an offensive or indecent” manner, cause “serious alarm or affront” to any person by disorderly conduct, obstruct anyone, defy a police direction or cause “annoyance or inconvenience”.

Deputy Commissioner Adams openly threatened mass arrests. “Passive and static” protests would be tolerated but “those who seek to break the law or attack police will be dealt with decisively”. Court authorities have created a number of additional courts, which will be open day and night to process any demonstrators arrested and charged.

These preparations point to a possible repeat of the police operations used against demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum meeting in Melbourne on 11 September, 2000. On that occasion, helmeted riot squad and mounted police charged into the crowd with batons, physically beating people back from a human blockade of the forum, injuring 400 people, including 50 who had to be hospitalised.

Various protest groups have vowed to proceed with peaceful marches and demonstrations, accusing the police of taking away their right to freedom of expression. A member of the international aid-monitoring group Aidwatch, James Arvanitakis, said police were inviting conflict by not allowing protests to go ahead legally. NSW Council for Civil Liberties vice president David Bernie said the decision not to issue permits “attacks basic rights of citizens to protest which is a way for those who are not financially or otherwise politically powerful to make their views known”.

Those participating are expected to include refugee advocates, environmental groups, trade unions, university and

high school students, churches, radical organisations, the Greens and the Australian Democrats. Most are protesting against economic globalisation, but many are opposing the looming US-led war on Iraq and the Howard government's treatment of asylum seekers.

About 800 people marched through Sydney last night in defiance of the state government's ban, protesting against the detention of refugees, as well as the prohibition of marches itself. They carried placards and banners reading, "Welcome refugees, kick out the WTO". Rather than confront the demonstrators, 100 police flanked the march and provided an escort, under an agreement with the organisers.

At the same time, Premier Carr emphasised that his government fully supported the police decision to deny march permits and block access to Olympic Park. "We've backed the police all the way. In NSW, they've demonstrated their capacity to handle demonstrations, allow people to protest, without infringing people's liberties," he told Channel Nine television.

On the eve of the protests, Police Minister Costa provocatively announced new "anti-terrorism" legislation to extend the police force's Olympic Games powers statewide. Legal and civil liberties organisations expressed concerns that the new laws, partly based on the British Labor government's Terrorism Act 2000, would go beyond the federal counter-terrorism package adopted by the Howard government.

In another attack on democratic rights, Costa last month called for the closure of web sites that could "aid the violent disruption" of the WTO meeting. He nominated Indymedia, an anti-capitalist "independent media centre," and s11.org—named after the September 11, 2000 protests in Melbourne. Costa asked the federal government to use censorship powers designed to restrict child pornography and other "offensive" material. Federal Communications Minister Richard Alston indicated his support, labelling the sites "insidious, anti-democratic and interested in causing violence, mayhem and anarchy".

The relevant statutory body, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) decided not to try to shut down the sites. This week, however, the ABA revealed that action had been taken against an unnamed web site. Its media officer told WSWS that a site had been refused classification for containing "prohibited material" that "instructed in matters of crime". Because the site was hosted outside Australia, no notice could be issued shutting down the site, but the site had been notified to the Australian Federal Police for further action.

Federal Justice Minister Chris Ellison, acting on the urging of the state and territory Labor governments, also announced a review of federal powers to block access to overseas web sites. A police ministers meeting in Darwin last week declared it was "unacceptable" that "web sites advocating or facilitating violent protest action be accessible from Australia". In 2001-02, the ABA issued four "take-down" notices against

Australian-based sites on grounds of "instructing in crime".

Some 25 trade ministers are attending the WTO mini-summit, designed to review progress on last November's so-called Doha round of trade talks, aimed at the removal of trade barriers for services and agriculture. WTO director general Supachai Panitchpakdi, US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Takeo Hiranuma are among those attending. The talks centre on opening up services such as water, health and education, as well as banks, insurance and other financial sectors, to the global market.

Earlier this year, the Howard government, aided by the Queensland Labor government, turned a British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting on the Sunshine Coast into an armed encampment. On the pretext of guarding against terrorism in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, some 2,400 military personnel were deployed on the ground and in the air. Police cars patrolled every intersection leading up to the venue, where government leaders and officials gathered in two hotels, entirely sealed off from the public.

Both events have demonstrated the extent to which governments and security agencies, federal and state, are now seeking to use the political climate created by the "war on terrorism" to clamp down on the most basic democratic rights, including freedom of assembly and expression. The authorities are clearly concerned by the protests, particularly under conditions where large numbers of ordinary people opposed to the impending war against Iraq and to the government's anti-refugee policies no longer regard the Labor Party and the trade unions as offering the slightest alternative.

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