

Australia: Workers and youth denounce government and media response to Sydney siege

By our reporters
22 December 2014

World Socialist Web Site reporters last weekend spoke with workers and youth in Sydney, Newcastle and Melbourne about the unprecedented “counter-terrorism operation” launched by federal and state governments last Monday after a disturbed gunman, Man Haron Monis, took 17 people hostage in Sydney’s central business district.

Instead of attempting to defuse the situation and open negotiations with Monis, hundreds of heavily armed police, including the Tactical Assault Group, were mobilised to lock down the area. The stand-off ended tragically with the death of two innocent people and the hostage-taker after paramilitary police stormed the cafe.

Prime Minister Abbott, backed by Labor and the Greens and the corporate media, claimed that Australia was facing a serious terrorist threat. It is now being exploited to advance an agenda of further involvement in US military interventions in the Middle East and new attacks on democratic rights at home (see: “The Sydney siege and the drive to war”).

While the barrage of government and media hysteria has created a degree of political confusion among sections of the population, many of those who spoke with the WSWs last weekend were deeply suspicious.

They voiced their concerns about government and media fear-mongering and said the siege would be used to call for new anti-terror laws and attacks on basic rights. Some pointed to the many unanswered questions about the siege and drew parallels with the violent police attacks on young people in the US. Others spoke about increasing attacks on Muslims.

In the Sydney beach-side suburb of Maroubra several residents said they were concerned about the media reportage and the general lack of information.

Phoebe said she was skeptical about the government and police response: “The guy wasn’t asking for anything else other than a phone call and an ISIS flag. It’s suspicious because the cops didn’t do anything for over 17 hours.

“[The police] didn’t need to bring their guns ... they went in with stun grenades and bullets. No one can confirm who killed who. I think they’ve done that to get collateral damage and win the sympathies of Australians ... Right after [the siege] Tony Abbott comes out with ‘well we’re going to have stricter and more vigilant laws.’”

Lauren declared: “This is a set-up to get us to be pro-American and to go into war in the Middle East and wherever else. It’s just a big war-machine. People are numbers. They [governments] don’t care who lives or dies ...

The government and media response to the siege, he continued, was “fear-mongering” to justify US military interventions in the Middle East. These operations are “to get their oil, their money, their land. I believe that it’s another hop, step, skip and jump towards a third world war. They wanted [the hostages] to die. They’re killing thousands of Syrians so what’s a couple of people in Sydney if it gets us into a war.”

In the southwest Sydney suburb of Fairfield, **Victor**, a cleaner, said: “It looks like a really suspicious situation. A man with a criminal record and a mental disorder who is known to the police can arrive in the middle of the city with a gun ...

“The real terror was the way the media covered the situation. Usually the religion of criminals is not reported but in this case they put it up front because they wanted to use it to justify their war in the Middle East.”

In the New South Wales regional city of Newcastle, **Dean**, a high-school student rejected government and media claims that the siege was a terrorist attack.

“The siege was conducted by one madman. It was not done for his culture but as some kind of publicity stunt. It was the government who took it to the next level and it really didn’t have to end as it did. Tony Abbott could have just picked up the phone and given him a call, which would have seen more hostages released.”

The death of two innocent people, he continued, “didn’t

have to happen. I truly believe that the way the situation was handled caused their deaths more than anything else. They didn't attempt to hear the man out and I feel the whole thing was handled in such a poor way."

Mel said that the siege had been carried out by "one poor sick man that clearly did not receive any mental health support. He was not a terrorist. I see a direct connection between the shutting down of the mental health services in Australia and this attack ...

"It is the same situation as that poor lady in Queensland who murdered those eight children. It is a mental health issue. She is a single parent looking after eight children and receiving no support from the government."

Mel drew a parallel with attacks on democratic rights in the US. "America is going to be a police state—it's already imposed martial law in the past—and the same process is underway in Australia," he said.

"The government is trying to utilise the siege as a terror weapon against the people of Australia. The government is already using the police as violent instruments of their draconian policies. They will now use this event to escalate their so-called anti-terror laws; which already make people guilty until proven innocent."

Ella, another Newcastle high school student, said: "How and why have these hostages died? It is obvious that the information is being censored because they've never specifically said it was the gunman who killed them. If it was the gunman I'm sure they would have stated it straight away ...

"We're not hearing anything about what the police did in the siege and how the hostages died. It has been covered 24/7 since Monday but not one report on how the hostages have died. We don't even know how the gunman died and if they even tried to take him alive."

In Dandenong in Melbourne's outer east, **Mark**, a forklift driver, said: "The media really fed hysteria over terrorism. The first thing I heard was the hostage-taker was a terrorist. It wasn't until the next day, that we were told it was a lone crazy guy. Even then the media was still speculating about terrorism, hanging on as long as they could ...

"This is how it works, particularly since 9/11: they create this hysteria in order to get into parliament, or push through something unpopular."

Zahra, from Footscray in west Melbourne, said she was shocked by the government response. The media coverage on police terror raids in September, she said was "propaganda, an excuse to go for a war about Iraq."

"As a Muslim woman I always felt safe in Australia, the people are very nice, kind but suddenly I don't feel so safe here on public transport. This is creating a huge problem. Everywhere you go you now feel scared, especially at night.

Some people just judge you if your head is covered."

Wendy, an education worker, denounced the media coverage. "It focussed on the siege in a totally shallow way. I'm very sorry for the people involved but I think it has been portrayed as a sensation. They are not looking at what the true reasons were. They complete simplify things and dumb everything down to a sound bite. The general press is not giving both sides of the story. It is not giving all the information.

I work with refugees and the press never gives all the details. There's never an in depth discussion on anything. Their approach is always to get people afraid. If people were given more information they would process it differently."

Peter an IT worker said: "[The hostage-taker] obviously had mental problems but it was an ordinary matter that was blown out of all proportion by the response. There was a massive media event. It is all about scaring us.

"After the event we don't know what happened. Did the hostage-taker kill both those people? Or were they killed by the police? We just don't know. The government doesn't seem to be interested in accountability.

"The economy is not doing well and so we've got bread and circuses or war to distract the populace. One percent of the population have the vast majority of the world's wealth and they control all of our governments. They tell the governments, 'Distract the people.'"

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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