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Australian police handed more military weaponry

Police in Australia's most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), have extended the use of military assault rifles. The Public Order and Riot Squad (PORS) will carry these weapons for the first time during the Christmas-New Year period in the state's capital, Sydney.

At a media conference in Sydney on December 18, Police Commissioner Mick Fuller, commander of the 16,000-strong state police force, said 47 PORS officers had completed training with Colt M-4 carbines. Another 100 would be trained by the middle of next year. The expanded access to M-4s will double the number of police with military-standard weaponry, previously issued only to smaller tactical units for alleged terrorism, hostage, siege and serious armed offender incidents. All NSW police are armed with pistols on duty.

Fuller claimed that the extension was necessary because of the increased threat of terrorism. He stated that while the federal government's terrorism threat level had remained "probable" since September 2014, he needed to put the more heavily armed police onto the streets if, and as soon as, the threat level was raised to high.

This claim is false and misleading. The PORS is specifically tasked with suppressing protests and social disturbances, not terrorism.

The PORS was formed in October 2005 after confrontations between police and working-class youth in two of Sydney's most impoverished areas—the inner suburb of Redfern, with a large Aboriginal population, in March 2004, and the western suburb of Macquarie Fields in February 2005. The clashes followed police chases of youth that resulted in their

deaths—Thomas Hickey in Redfern and Dylan Raywood and Matthew Robertson in Macquarie Fields.

The then Labor Party state government of Premier Bob Carr exploited the protests to test new ways of quelling unrest, including the formation of the permanent riot squad.

Until now, the PORS specialist equipment has featured rubber bullets, capsicum spray, two types of batons, handcuffs and cable flex-cuffs and protective clothing, supposedly to counter petrol bombs and projectiles. The issuing of M-4s to “public order” police is a sign of the further militarisation of the police, an international phenomenon, in anticipation of increasing social tensions.

Decades of pro-market economic restructuring, destruction of manufacturing and other full-time jobs and cuts to government services have produced high youth unemployment and unprecedented social inequality.

Fuller indicated that the current Liberal-National Coalition government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian is planning more extensive issuing of the assault rifles. “[P]erhaps next year, depending on the environment, you may see officers deployed in a standard patrolling type method with these types of firearms,” he said.

Fuller denied any immediate plans to equip the entire police force with such weapons. It was definitely possible, “but certainly not in the coming months. We need to have that conversation.”

The M-4 is widely used by the US Army and Australian Special Forces. It has a 30-round magazine firing the 5.56 x 45mm NATO military round with a muzzle velocity of 910 metres per second. If used in full automatic mode, an M-4 can fire 770-950 rounds per minute. Because of the rounds’ kinetic energy, the effects are horrific. The weapon is effective out to 600 metres for aimed shots but lethal impacts extend beyond this.

At the media conference, staged at Sydney’s central bayside Circular Quay, PORS members paraded around, brandishing their new weapons among workers, shoppers and café patrons. It was an intimidating display. Police Minister Troy Grant said some people would be “confronted” by police having “a greater capacity in relation to their firearms and their arsenal,” but the community should be “comforted” by the knowledge the police had the capacity to protect it.

Last June, when the re-arming of the PORS was first announced, the government unveiled legislation to give police more legal protection if they use their weapons in a “pre-emptive” shooting of a suspect in a “terrorist” incident. These moves will only increase the likelihood of police killing people with impunity.

Between 1989 and 2011, 105 people were shot dead by police in Australia, according to a 2013 report by the Australian Institute of Criminology. All but one were declared justified by coroners. Not one police officer was charged.

As the pretext for its June announcement, the Berejiklian government used the December 2014 Lindt café siege in central Sydney. The federal and state governments falsely labeled that incident, which resulted in the deaths of two of the 18 hostages, as a terrorist attack. In reality, the hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, was mentally unstable and well known to police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation.

The siege was politically exploited to further extend some of the world's most anti-democratic "counter-terrorism" laws, which include detention and interrogation without charge. The definitions of terrorist-related offences have also been broadened to potentially cover protest actions including against Australia's participation in Washington's wars.