

State Repression in Aotearoa / New Zealand

In a wave of massive state repression in Aotearoa / New Zealand, 300+ para-military Police carried out dawn raids at houses around the country on Monday October 15th 2007, making 16 arrests. Search warrants were carried out in Auckland, Whakatane, Ruatoki, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington and other centres in the North Island, and in Christchurch in the South Island. The warrants stated that the Police were searching for evidence for charges under the Arms Act and the Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA), making this the first time the TSA was invoked in a search warrant.

All the arrestees initially received multiple charges under the Arms Act. Police said they would consider laying further charges, including under the TSA, for which permission was needed from the Solicitor General. In the days following the initial arrests, many people around the country were questioned by police and more properties were searched. The arrestees have been active in the Tino Rangatiranga (loosely translates to Maori self-determination), anarchist, peace and environmental movements and in their communities.

The raids were the culmination of 18 months of surveillance, including phone, cellphone, vehicle and other bugging. The Police alleged the 16, and others, had been involved in what they called "terrorist training camps" in the mountainous Urewera region in the North-East of the North Island, in the area known as Tuhoe Country, after the Maori iwi (tribe) that lives there. The Police have suggested that some or all of the arrestees were planning a bombing campaign and other attacks designed to advance the cause of independence for Tuhoe Country from the New Zealand Government.

Prominent Tuhoe activist Tame Iti was the first arrested at his home at 4am Monday morning. At 6am raids were carried out at A Space Inside anarchist social centre in Auckland and the 128 activist Community Centre in Wellington. In Tuhoe Country, the towns of Ruatoki and Taneatua were blockaded by armed police for several hours, with all cars leaving and entering being searched and their occupants photographed, and many houses and people searched and questioned.

In the first four weeks, all 16 arrestees were steadily moved from prisons around the country to two Auckland prisons, to make prosecutions more convenient for the Police. This meant moving them away from their whanau (family) and friends, from their support networks. Four prisoners were granted bail in the two weeks following the raids, and then on November 1st and 2nd, all 16 arrestees were to be heard in one court for the first time, in Auckland. Just prior to the hearings, the Police announced they would apply to the Solicitor-General to lay terrorism charges against 12 of the 16 arrestees. During the two days of hearings, two more prisoners were granted bail, leaving just 10 of the 16 in prison – two women and eight men.

On November 8th, the Solicitor-General, David Collins, announced he would not give permission for TSA charges to be laid due to insufficient evidence. The next day, 6 arrestees were granted bail due to the change in circumstances, and 3 days later the last of the arrestees were released. Following the Solicitor-General's decision, the Police leaked cherry-picked suppressed evidence from their surveillance to the corporate media, in an attempt to influence public opinion against the arrestees, and further inhibit any chance at them receiving unbiased jurors when the Arms Act charges eventually go to trial.

While all 16 are now out on bail, they still face multiple charges and potential prison sentences under the Arms Act, and trials could still be years away, with tens of thousands of pages of evidence to be examined. In the meantime, many have non-association orders preventing them from interacting in any way with some of their closest friends, while others have strict curfews and have to report multiple times per week to the Police. Some of the prisoners had virtually everything they own confiscated during the raids, some lost their homes, and the emotional and financial impacts on their families has been immense.

The Context

"I weep for what has just happened at Maungapohatu in Tuhoe. The police raid seems to be about punishing Kenana for questioning the crown and will only take us back to the mists of fear and doubt...I wonder if we will ever stop worrying when it might happen again"

Karaitiana Rarere – Ngati Kahungunu, 1916

For Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa / New Zealand, and for Tuhoe in particular, repression

and brutality at the hands of the colonial state are nothing new. Tuhoe, the tribe at the centre of much of the Police allegations, never signed the Treaty Of Waitangi, the treaty that the New Zealand Government uses to attempt to legitimise its rule over Aotearoa / New Zealand. It is in Tuhoe Country that you will find the highest rate of Te Reo Maori as a first language, with English relegated to second. They have always remained staunchly independent, and as such have always been considered a threat by the State.

In 1867, the Government confiscated vast tracts of land from Tuhoe, including all access to the coastline, under the pretext of punishing it for alleged involvement in the murder of a missionary. This confiscation left Tuhoe landlocked and therefore without a source of kaimoana (seafood). Almost all of Tuhoe's fertile crop-growing land was also taken.

By 1916, many Tuhoe had flocked to the village of Maungapohatu, where a man named Rua Kenana preached a new way of life and opposition to World War 1 and the conscription laws. This was too much for the State to handle, and so they attacked, killing 2, wounding others and taking Kenana prisoner. Kenana would spend almost two years in prison, despite being found not guilty of his charge of sedition, and the peaceful community he helped establish would never be the same.

Tuhoe remained ever resilient however. In recent years, they have begun negotiations with the Waitangi Tribunal, in an attempt to get back their land and to receive compensation for what the State has taken from them. It was during a Tribunal hearing in Tuhoe Country in 2005 that Tame Iti, one of those arrested in recent raids, was charged with a firearms offence, after shooting a New Zealand flag during the "welcoming" ceremony for the State officials. That event was part of a wider welcome, during which the aim was to make the officials see and feel a taste of what Tuhoe had gone through at the hands of the New Zealand Government since colonisation began.

"We wanted them to feel the heat and smoke, and Tuhoe outrage and disgust at the way we have been treated for 200 years. (The Crown) destroyed people's homes and burned their crops and we wanted them to feel that yesterday. We wanted to demonstrate to them what it feels like being powerless."

Tame Iti, Tuhoe, 2005

Solidarity Is Strength!

The raids provoked an immediate display of solidarity and support all across Aotearoa / New Zealand (and indeed the world), from the 100 people gathered at the Wellington District Court during the first appearance there of 4 of the arrestees on the afternoon of October 15th, to the 1000 people marching to the court appearance of Tame Iti in Rotorua, to 1000 marching in Auckland to Auckland Central Remand Prison where many of those arrested were held, to 2000 gathering in Wellington on December 1st at an all day festival to demand the repealing of the Terrorism Suppression Act.

Support has come from leftist groups and individuals (anarchists, socialists etc.), Maori, some unions and unionists (although others seemed too afraid to anger the ruling Labour Party!), civil libertarians and others, and while the political lines have differed from group to group, generally cooperation has been effective in most centres. Some groups took on the roles of prisoner and whanau (family) support, while others focussed on demonstrations and public events, with still others fundraising, writing articles for newspapers or doing education work.

Overseas, solidarity with the arrestees has also been present. Demonstrations have been held at New Zealand embassies and consulates from London, England to Sydney, Australia, and messages of support received from Mexico (including from the sister of a Oaxacan political prisoner), Greece, Canada, and more. Since their release, many of the arrestees have expressed their gratitude and thanks to their supporters all over the world.

"The history of Tuhoe shows that Tuhoe did not concede, did not cede, did not give up, did not even rent out their sense of sovereignty... their view is, as an independent people that want interdependence as a lifestyle"

Taamati Kruger – Tuhoe, 2007

For more information on the raids and solidarity events and actions:

<http://www.october15thsolidarity.info>