

New Zealand:

Trouble on Queen St.

Letter from Red Flag*

On Friday, December 7th, a political earthquake shook Auckland, New Zealand, staggering the city fathers and businessmen and the country's rulers. This was the most violent battle of Queen Street since the first one over 50 years ago, in 1932, when starving unemployed smashed and looted shops. On this occasion thousands of young people battled police and raced down the street smashing shop windows, pillaging and setting fire to cars. Years of simmering anger and frustration, and particularly hostility towards the guardians of the law, suddenly burst all restraints and boiled over into violent action....

Most of those involved were young, probably about half of them unemployed, and some were teenagers of about 14 years of age. The damage was estimated at \$1 million. The apparently spontaneous and wild action of the young people sounded a warning signal to the government and the country's rulers: we don't give a damn about your laws, values and property of your system in which we have no faith or stake; what have we to lose when we have no job, no home, no future?

The storm began in the evening during a free rock concert in a central square. Some police present started to arrest some youths for alleged minor offenses. When other young people retaliated with beer cans the police stopped the concert so as to "maintain communication between their vehicles." This action provoked further anger and soon the cops were showered with a hailstorm of missiles. They were forced to don their "riot" gear. The main targets of the youth were the police and property, not concert-goers or shoppers. When the Mayoress of Auckland, Mrs. Tizard, went into Queen Street to see what was happening and right into the centre of the action, she remained untouched.

The seeds of Friday night, said a Member of Parliament, were sown in 1981 (the year of the nationwide demonstrations against apartheid and the tour of the Springbok rugby team from South Africa). At that time cops attacked demonstrators with vicious brutality, severely injuring many people. The seeds of discontent and hostility towards the police were also sown in an even earlier period—a period during which police 'task forces' prowled the streets and the pubs looking for 'overstayers' (Islanders presumed to

have overstayed their permits to live and work in New Zealand). Today, the hassling of young people, particularly of Maoris and Islanders, who may be waiting for busses at bus stops, still goes on. "We have absolutely no relationship with the police," a young Maori woman told a television interviewer.

A commission of enquiry into the riot on Queen Street has been set up by the government. Prevention of the consumption of alcohol at open-air concerts and the reformation of police methods, placing more emphasis on community police (the friendly local cop style), are being considered. But it hardly needs pointing out that whatever the commission comes up with no basic improvements or changes are possible under the present system....

A local daily editorial concluded by saying: "But as we clean up the question we ignore at our peril is—why?" It is indeed becoming a perilous situation for the ruling class and there is undoubtedly worse to come. True enough, the system creates its own gravediggers. ■

* *Red Flag* is published by the New Zealand Red Flag Group.