

Australia: Riots in Sydney as police blamed for death of 17-year-old Aboriginal boy

Richard Phillips
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Angry rioting and clashes with police involving more than 50 local youth erupted in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Redfern on Sunday night following the death of Thomas “TJ” Hickey, a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy, the day before. The teenager was killed after he was catapulted from his bicycle at approximately 11.15 a.m. on Saturday and impaled on a metal fence in a nearby public housing estate. He was admitted to Sydney Children’s Hospital but died some 12 hours later of chest, neck and internal injuries.

New South Wales state police immediately claimed Hickey’s death was an accident but three witnesses said police officers were pursuing the teenager when he was impaled. Hickey’s mother, Gail, and other residents blamed the police for the teenager’s death and said he had been chased by police officers and was a victim of constant police harassment in the area.

Local Aboriginal resident Lyall Munro told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters yesterday that residents were “dumbfounded” by police claims that there was no chase. He said there had been “no concern” shown towards the family and no official explanation given by the police or the government.

“Evidence suggests that the young fellow was pulled off the piling and strip-searched before back-up police were called, as opposed to an ambulance. These are pretty alarming things associated with this situation and has completely traumatised the community,” he said.

Police persecution of young Aborigines is a permanent feature of life in Redfern, where they suffer high poverty, high unemployment and the lack of any real job prospects or decent education. Whether or not the police were directly chasing the teenager is not clear at this stage. Whatever the case, Hickey saw a police patrol car and, based on previous experience, thought he was about to be arrested or assaulted and sped off on his bicycle. Travelling at high speed, he apparently lost control and was flung in the air and onto the metal fence.

As anger simmered throughout the community on Sunday morning, NSW police called a press conference to categorically deny any involvement in Hickey’s death. This further inflamed grieving relatives, local youth and residents, where it was common knowledge that Hickey had been targeted by police on bag snatching allegations and that they had a warrant for his arrest on assault charges. Within hours, posters accusing police of murder began appearing on lampposts and walls throughout the area.

According to residents, police then began a provocative large-

scale mobilisation in the area. Local youth began venting their anger against the police and the nearby Redfern railway station. Soon after, police claimed rocks were hitting trains and passing cars and ordered the closure of the station.

Members of the riot squad were brought in, the streets sealed off, and all traffic, including buses, directed to by-pass the area. At approximately 9 p.m., Redfern police issued a “signal one” alert mobilising all available inner metropolitan commands to the area.

Rioting exploded soon after, with petrol bombs thrown onto the railway station roof, and the building’s windows smashed and the entrance torched. Direct clashes began after more than 60 police equipped with long batons, riot shields and helmets attempted to force residents from the street. Youth shouting “child killers” and “murderers” fought back with rocks, bottles, petrol bombs and fireworks.

In an unprecedented use of state fire-fighting services, police called in seven fire trucks, using searchlights and high-powered fire hoses against local residents. Attempts to surround the rioters at midnight and move them out of the area were repulsed as confrontations continued outside the railway station for the next two to three hours.

According to media reports, several police riot shields were broken, two officers were admitted to hospital with injured knees and one with head injuries. Four people accused of rioting were detained and arrested. One of those held was later admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment.

NSW opposition leader John Brogden immediately called on the state’s Labor government to bulldoze homes near where the rioting occurred. Known as “The Block”, the area is bounded by Eveleigh, Louis, Vine and Caroline streets and is a traditional meeting place for Aboriginal people across New South Wales. It was originally given to local Aborigines by the Whitlam Labor government in one of the country’s first land rights deals.

Brogden’s provocative comments were echoed the next day by the Murdoch-owned tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, whose editorial claimed the police had acted with “commendable restraint” but that these “accommodating tactics” were “self-defeating”. In an op-ed piece, *Telegraph* commentator Piers Akerman denounced the state government for being too soft and pandering to “self-indulgent social engineers”. He demanded the introduction of “drastic new strategies”.

While NSW Premier Bob Carr has not publicly embraced these calls, the policy pursued by his government is little different from

Brogden's.

On Monday, Carr extended his unconditional backing to the police, telling the media: "I've got full confidence in the way police tackled this incident." He announced three separate investigations into Hickey's death and the ensuing riots—a police inquiry, an ombudsman's report and a coronial inquiry.

Carr later claimed that "grief, alcohol and high summer temperatures" had sparked the riots. Such claims are a transparent attempt to affect the outcome of the three inquiries in advance and to deflect attention from the deeper social factors that caused Hickey's death and precipitated the riots.

Lyall Munro directly blamed police for the rioting: "The police build-up began at about two o'clock and went on all afternoon. They were coming past and taunting the young people, who were obviously traumatised by the death of their young friend that they went to school with and that they've lived with. Rednecks were also driving past taunting them.

"All of a sudden there was this large gathering of police and it was obvious what their intentions were. They closed Redfern station, the front section, and closed off the streets. They came with an ulterior motive, they were ready and had their agenda all worked out. Then the thing just erupted with about 20-30 young school kids who stood up and told this country once and for all 'No means no, and we're not going to take it anymore'.

"ABC radio suggested to me that we provoked it and set up the young people to do it. No, we had nothing to do with it. It was their response and initially they lashed out at buildings. They weren't hurting people, they were lashing out at buildings and material things. But as far as we're concerned the young people were right in what they did. It was a spontaneous reaction to this massing of police on their doorstep."

The death of "TJ" Hickey and the brutal response of the Carr government is a sharp expression of the political and social position of the overwhelming majority of Aborigines throughout Australia.

Aborigines are the poorest and most oppressed section of the working class, with the highest unemployment rates and imprisonment. They suffer the lowest standards of health, education, employment and housing. According to 2001 figures, the average life expectancy of male Aborigines is 56 years and women 63 years, compared to 77 years and 82 for other Australians. Aboriginal infant mortality rates are about twice as high as white Australian babies. The imprisonment rate for adult Aborigines is 16 times that for non-indigenous adults and 17 times higher for Aborigines aged 10 to 17 than their non-indigenous counterparts.

The Carr government has always responded to the terrible plight of Aborigines in Redfern with the full force of the state. Riot police, dog squads, officers on horse back and other heavily armed officers have been mobilised against Redfern residents on a regular basis. Sporadic clashes with police have intensified in Redfern since 1996.

These attacks are related to big business attempts to redevelop "The Block," which is a high-value inner city real estate area.

Over the past eight years, the Carr government has been working with the Aboriginal Housing Company, a group of black business

entrepreneurs that owns "The Block" and wants to relocate the remaining Aborigines out of the area. In so doing, they will reap windfall profits from a property redevelopment scheme.

While many residents opposed this plan when it was first announced in the late 1990s and refused to leave, endemic unemployment, poverty, drug infestation and ongoing police harassment have forced many to quit the area.

In 1997 the Aboriginal Housing Company demolished 70 properties and moved 43 of the 55 Aboriginal families out of the area. In fact, "The Block" has largely been destroyed, with the few remaining houses in a state of decay and disrepair, and the company refusing to provide necessary maintenance and repairs.

Munro told WSWs: "There's been this misconception that this type of thing can't happen in Australia. They think they only see it on TV in Palestine, Africa, Central America, or in North America. But what happened here last night has freaked out this country. Young people feel they've got nothing to lose. They don't fear the police presence anymore, after that young fellow lost his life, and that's a very dangerous situation for our young people to be in.

"Police officers are being trained to kill and I really think that on the next occasion they will pull their guns. My honest guess is that these will be the instructions in case of a repetition," he said.

Boney, another Redfern resident, told WSWs that Hickey's death was "another Rodney King" and was caused by "homelessness and no health". Tony, 14, who was friend of Thomas Hickey and witnessed the rioting, said the police made clear they were "going to bash anyone, whoever got in their way." He said police assaults on young Aborigines happened "all the time".

Rioting in Redfern on Sunday has brought to the surface deep-seated social tensions that have built up in Aboriginal communities and other poverty stricken sections of the working class throughout Australia. The only response of governments will be further repression.



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