

Australia: Hundreds mourn the death of TJ Hickey

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About 350 people carrying banners, placards and flowers marched in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern yesterday in remembrance of Thomas “TJ” Hickey, the 17-year-old Aboriginal boy who died on February 15 after he came off his bicycle at high speed and was impaled on a metal fence.

The teenager believed that police were chasing him, a suspicion subsequently confirmed by three separate witnesses. While the cops claimed that they had nothing to do with the death, large numbers of riot squad and scores of officers were sent into the area the next day, provoking riots and a nine-hour clash with Aboriginal youth and local residents.

Sydney mourners, including TJ’s friends, Aborigines from across Sydney, as well as students and workers, marched from the “Block” in Redfern to the metal fence in the public housing estate where Hickey was impaled. Many of those attending carried placards blaming police for Hickey’s death and demanding their removal from Redfern.

The Redfern march coincided with TJ’s burial at Walgett, a rural town in northwest New South Wales, where the young boy spent his childhood. Over 400 people, including TJ’s mother Gail, his six sisters and other relatives, family friends and mourners, attended the funeral service. Members of the Walgett Dragons rugby league team, to which TJ once belonged, formed a guard of honour as the coffin, draped in an Aboriginal flag, was carried out of the church and mourners marched down the main street. Many of the town’s shops were closed in memory of the dead teenager.

One of those heading the Redfern march was Jack Morgan, TJ’s first cousin and a former resident of Walgett. Morgan has been permanently paralysed and confined to a wheelchair for the past 23 years following a motorcycle accident—the result of a high-speed police chase in Walgett.

Mourners laid flowers along the metal fence where TJ died and observed a minute’s silence before marching to the Redfern police station. They were prevented, however, from getting close to the building by crowd control barriers and a phalanx of up to 30 Special Operations Group officers.

In an attempt to intimidate mourners, scores of additional officers equipped with capsicum gas were grouped outside the police station entrance and a police helicopter hovered overhead. The Carr government, fuelled by inflammatory articles in the mass media suggesting that there would be a repetition of last week’s clashes, also dispatched extra police to Walgett and placed others on standby in nearby towns.

Previous promises by state authorities that Ian West, TJ’s father, would be given day release from Bathurst jail to attend the funeral, were reversed on Monday. He was to have been a pallbearer. NSW Corrective Services officers cancelled West’s day release, claiming that police and local Aboriginal elders could not provide adequate security. Likewise Raymond Carr, one of TJ’s cousins, who has been charged over the Redfern riots, was refused bail on Monday, preventing him attending the funeral. Since the clashes on February 15, 10 people have been arrested and charged.

Despite these provocations, Aboriginal leaders in Redfern worked to dissipate the mounting tension and prevent any serious discussion of the causes of Hickey’s death. Speakers at the protest said nothing about the culpability of the state and federal government and the various Aboriginal bodies, including the Aboriginal Housing Company, in the scandalous poverty and living conditions facing Aborigines in Redfern.

Kevin Smith told mourners: “We are here not because we’re mad but to let the world know how sad we feel about this death in our community.”

Redfern Aboriginal leaders presented police with a list of 17 demands, one for each year of TJ Hickey’s life, including the immediate suspension from active duty of all police officers involved in the tragedy and the convening of a Royal Commission.

While mourners maintained a respectful silence during the march, a deep-seated anger prevailed which erupted into loud cheers when the first of the 17 demands—for the suspension of the police involved in the incident—was read out.

Other demands included the public release of ambulance reports, police logbooks and radio transcripts, an independent forensic examination of the site where TJ died, police vehicles and TJ’s bicycle, and answers to following questions:

Why was the first police call about the incident made to police backup and not Emergency Rescue Services? Why did police move TJ from the metal fence without calling the appropriate Emergency Rescue Services or an ambulance? Who did Redfern Police Area Commander inform, liaise with and take instructions from in relation to the build up of police in Lawson Street on the afternoon of February 15?

While these questions must be answered, a Royal Commission into TJ Hickey’s death will do nothing to address the fundamental causes or prevent similar tragedies in the future.

As the 1988-89 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and Queensland’s 1994 Criminal Justice Commission

investigation into the police killing of 18-year-old Aborigine Daniel Yock have demonstrated, every state-run investigation into the deaths of Aborigines has been a whitewash. Despite the deaths of hundreds of Aborigines at the hands of Australian police, not a single officer has been charged with a serious crime. In fact, the number of Aborigines dying in police custody has increased since these so-called inquiries.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to a number of people participating in the Redfern march. Graham Mooney, 55, who used to work with young people in the Block during the 1980s, said the aggressive police action following the Redfern riot came as no surprise.

“I’ve seen so many raids on the street like this—from the 70s till now—and it’s still going on,” he said. “Everybody gets harassed by the police, even grown ups and there’s a lot of kids that I know that were picked up but were innocent.”

Commenting on the government’s moves to destroy the Block, Mooney said: “In terms of facades there’s nothing here, that’s why I couldn’t understand [NSW opposition leader] John Brogden. What’s he going to bulldoze? There’s nothing to knock down here. This is a political drive with the government to get this prime real estate. Any fool can see that.”

Several young Aborigines spoke about the daily police harassment, including cases of assault. Kelly, 15, and her friends had taken time off school in order to attend the march. “The police use violence against us,” Kelly said. “No matter what age you are.

“Most people outside think that this place is a drug hole but this is where we reside, where we live. We’ve got a community and most of us down here go to school. We don’t drink every day and we’re not hard on heroin and cocaine and all that.

“We’re not going to leave the Block—it’s sacred to us. Knock it down, do whatever you want but we’re going to stay here. This is our land and we’re going to stay here.”

Gavin Ritchie, 30, a dancer with the Redfern Aboriginal Dance Theatre, has lived in Redfern for the past 10 years.

“The police are here [on the Block] every day,” he said. “They’re just waiting around, waiting for something to happen. But then they’re quite happy to sit back and watch our people kill themselves on heroin. They don’t do anything towards helping that situation.

“I guess it’s all come to a head,” he continued. “A lot of the kids here ... were little babies in the 80s and early 90s when the police were coming in and raiding the Block at three o’clock in the morning and forcing every man, woman and child out into the street. And naturally, the youth are going to grow up and have a negative view of the police. I really can’t blame them. Although rioting is not the answer to anything, I can understand where it came from. It was building up for ages.”

Ritchie pointed to some of the problems facing young Aborigines in the area. “Recreationally there’s nothing to do,” he said. “Things for kids to do these days cost quite a bit of money and they just don’t have the money to do it.

“As far as education goes it’s part of Australian history that Aborigines weren’t given an education. It’s not like they can take their schoolwork home and say, ‘Mum and Dad can you help with this,’ because Mum and Dad can’t help them. And so they’ve got

no help at home—it just makes it so much harder. TJ was basically illiterate and therefore didn’t stand a chance. He was at that age where [with] no education, there was really no other way for him to survive except for petty crime.”

Ritchie said moves to incorporate Redfern into Sydney’s central business district were behind the attacks on the local Aboriginal community. “When I walk down the Block I look and think, that’s what they want, that view of the city. It is amazing and a prime piece of real estate.

Commenting on Brogden’s call for the Block to be bulldozed, Ritchie said: “Brogden summed up pretty much the whole government’s attitude, no matter what side of the fence [they] sit on. Their policy is to bulldoze the area and get all the blackfellas out. They want the land. They’re not really concerned with the problems that exist here. They just prefer to see the problems moved on to someone else’s back yard and let them deal with it.”

Ritchie was sharply critical of Aboriginal leaders in bureaucratic bodies such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. “They’re driving around in their nice cars, they’ve got their lovely computers, their nice houses and they go on their fabulous trips around the country, supposedly doing papers on different things and studies but they don’t really do anything. The money doesn’t get to the grass roots people where it needs to get.

“How are kids that are born into poverty going to get out of poverty without some assistance or help? There has to be some backup for people,” he continued. “The standard of housing here would not be tolerated anywhere else. Why should it be tolerated here? The houses should be fixed.

“There are good people here that just want to live a good life like everybody else. They don’t want anything special. When you treat people like animals, that’s what you’re going to get. If you want to lock people up in cages or whatever, they’re going to behave like animals. You have to treat people with a certain level of humanity and decency.”



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