

Macquarie Fields residents speak out

Australia: working class suburb under police siege

Mike Head, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Werriwa
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Youth and residents of Macquarie Fields, an outer Sydney suburb, are still living under a virtual police siege a week after the fatal police chase that resulted in the deaths of two local teenagers, and sparked protests and street battles with police.

Last Friday night, riot police stormed homes in the public housing estate after confronting youth following the funeral for a 17-year-old young man, one of the boys who died. Residents who resisted the raids had fly screen doors torn off the hinges of their homes by heavily-armed officers wielding batons and shields. Occupants were dragged away in handcuffs.

At the insistence of the 17-year-old young man's family, police stayed away from the funeral, where the 17-year-old young man's football teammates made a guard of honour as his coffin was brought into the chapel at nearby Leppington. But once the funeral ended, a massive police force moved into the suburb, including 20 plain-clothes officers, the dog squad, and more than four buses of riot police. Police blocked off all three entrances to the housing estate and questioned every person leaving or entering, as they had done on several nights during the week.

For the first time, in what a police spokesman described as a "show of force", OSG (Police Operations Support Group) units were joined by police on horseback. They paraded noisily through residential streets until midnight as police helicopters flew low overhead spotlighting houses and anyone venturing outside.

Riot squad units provoked youth into violent clashes, stopping them on the streets and charging after those who were holding a peaceful barbecue and wake in the street. One OSG squadron cornered a group of about seven teenagers in a cul-de-sac, ignoring their pleas that they were having a drink in memory of the dead boys. "Show some respect," the youth yelled, only to be pursued by police.

At least five houses were raided, and nine people arrested—including a 16-year-old boy, charged with rioting and breach of bail, an 18-year-old youth charged with offensive language, and another, aged 19, charged with throwing a missile, malicious damage and offensive behaviour. Other arrests were made for so-called "street offences". They brought the total of riot-related arrests for the week to 38.

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr and Police Minister Carl Scully made it clear that the government took direct responsibility for the police operation. Carr said he had ordered the police to "drench" the suburb and carry out as many arrests as possible. Scully boasted that in total, 62 people had been arrested in Macquarie Fields during the week, on a variety of charges.

A Socialist Equality Party campaign team spoke to residents outside the party's election office at the Glenquarie shopping centre on Saturday morning. Nearly everyone had a story to tell about being manhandled or intimidated by police.

Many people spoke of a protracted history of police aggression against

local youth, including dangerous car chases of boys as young as 14 riding trail bikes. A number pointed out that the police chase that killed the 17-year-old young man and Matthew Robertson, 19, had been completely unnecessary, because the boys allegedly involved in stealing the car had been under police electronic surveillance for several days beforehand.

Most residents expressed disgust with Carr's declaration that the clashes in Macquarie Fields were simply the product of "criminal" individuals and had nothing to do with social disadvantage.

Melissa Perrott said: "Last night, the police came in again. The police say they were confronted by youth. That's a lie. The police were all over the place. Their noise woke my baby up. The police say there are rioters here, but the police are creating the problem. The media's also fuelling it and making it a lot worse."

Perrott described some of the immediate background to the fatal car crash. "The police planted listening devices in the home of Jesse Kelly [the alleged driver of the stolen car] three days before the chase. So they could have arrested the boys in the house, but they chased them instead. It was to cause trouble.

"In the first minutes after the car crash, the police car was taken away, because it had rammed the boys' car. A couple of people saw that happen. The boys may have committed a crime when they stole the car, but they did not deserve to die.

"This is the attitude of the police and the government. When the police arrest young boys out here, they don't just arrest them; they belt them up. I've got a friend who first got arrested when he was 14 for wagging school, and every time the police see him, they bash him. And they go to his house all the time for no reason."

She condemned Carr's statement. "Around here, young people have got no chances in life. You don't get anywhere around here unless you have a well-off family. The way some kids see it, stealing cars is the only way you can get money. What chance have kids got when the high school here doesn't even have air conditioning in the summer and there are only two heaters in the winter? And there's no jobs around here."

A long-time resident, Sue said the police had inflamed the situation out of all proportion. "My house backs onto the street where it all happened, so I have seen everything. I blame the police for provoking the situation. If the police weren't here, the youth wouldn't have anyone to abuse would they? They are not bad kids, they're really not.

"The police last night were everywhere. It's just ridiculous. I have never seen anything like it in my life. I saw the police arrest a girl outside my place. They had to let her go because she had done nothing, except for being a bit loud. They let her go, but not before they had put her in the paddy wagon and humiliated her.

"The other night, after a paddy wagon arrived with drinks for the police, I saw one police officer put a bottle on the ground and smash it with his

baton. They left broken glass where our kids play. Then they blame the lads. Later, I saw another officer break a bottle. When he saw us at the bedroom window, he shone his torch in our faces and told us to get back inside.

“During the riots, when the boys were throwing things, the police didn’t worry about protecting any residents. But when it calmed down, they told us to get inside and shut our doors. They didn’t ask us, they just told us. They were not really concerned about our safety—they treat us like dirt.

“I spoke to Channel 10 and I told them I blamed the police for what had happened. It never went to air. I am not scared of these kids. If you treat them with respect, they’ll treat you with respect. I know they get into mischief, but you can’t blame them because there’s not much for them to do, and the police stop them for nothing.”

A mother who preferred not to have her name published, said: “On Saturday night, my son and I walked up to the shopping centre. We were surrounded by the riot police. There was a riot officer in front of my son and one on each side. He is only 16. I was told to sit in the gutter because the police said my son looked like the driver of the car. He was searched by two of the officers and told to take off his shirt. He had no tattoos, so they let him go.

“Then they told us to get out of the area, or we would be charged. But I live across the road from where the riots occurred. We couldn’t even stand in the street, or we were going to be charged. To be quite frank, if the police had pulled out, the riots would not have kept going. The riots were a response to the police.”

She disagreed strongly with Carr’s comments. “Just look at the poor conditions that these kids have to put up with. They have nothing to do, nowhere to go. There’s not enough youth centres. Look at areas like Mosman, on the North Shore—they have plenty of things for young people to do. If kids muck up in Mosman, they get a slap on the wrist compared to this. I could not see any of this happening in Mosman.

“Just because you are socially disadvantaged does not mean you are a criminal. I would like to see Bob Carr come here for a week and live in a Housing Commission house to see what kind of conditions we have to live in. A lot of the houses are sub-standard.

“There is a lot of unemployment around here. Unfortunately, a lot of kids don’t even look for work because they know that with a poor education they have no chance of getting a decent job. They are not bad or evil, as Carr says. It is a lack of resources.”

Cindy Siddons, another concerned mother, said police chases of young people started at an early age. “You have 14 and 15-year-old kids on trail bikes being chased through the streets here at high speed. The police could easily kill someone. They go flying around corners, sliding out on their tyres, while they chase these kids. There are little kids on the side of the road and the police are going to end up hitting some of them.

“It’s unbelievable what the police do. All right, these boys are not supposed to ride their trail bikes on the roads. But the police chase them out of the bush tracks where they ride, and then they chase them on the streets. It’s just to have control over them. They treat these kids like they are criminals, but they are only kids.

“The police could easily have stopped the boys in the stolen car by putting up road blocks. They can seal off this suburb in a few seconds flat. The boys would have run from the car, and the police could have arrested them at their houses.

“My son, who is 13, saw the chase because he was coming home from a Blue Light disco. He said that when the police were chasing the car, they were doing about 140 kilometres an hour and they were right up the back of the other car. So I could believe that the police rammed the car.

“I don’t agree with Bob Carr. Not all these kids are bad kids. Some of them are still at school for goodness sake! The police treat them like the enemy. After the crash, they said, ‘oh well, that’s two less to worry about’.

“I didn’t like the riots every night, but the police were stoking it. Groups of riot police would come up to kids and stand in front of them, with their shields up, and just wait for a response. If they got no response, they would march down the street and get another group of kids and do it again. They would wait until somebody swore or something. That’s what they did last night and last Monday. They were provoking.”

A resident of Eucalyptus Drive, where the boys died, was furious about the police chase and the continual harassment of young people. “Last night there were 15 or 20 police on horses clip-clopping down my street at 11.30 p.m., keeping children and everyone else awake. It was just a provocation, like the police were saying, ‘come outside and take us on’. Helicopters were flying low enough to spotlight into people’s houses and yards.

“The police are like a militia, like Nazis, driving around the streets at high speed all the time, intimidating people.”

Asked about Carr’s comments, she said the government had run-down everything in the area, including the trains and public transport. “The government says there are things for young people like a skate park and swimming pool, but these are not new. Most of them are about 15-years-old and not very good. There are no decent facilities at all. I am not defending young people who steal cars, but they do these things because there are no opportunities.”

Peter Butler, a community worker, said his daughter, who lives in the housing estate, was among those attacked by police after the 17-year-old young man’s funeral. “What the young people are saying to the police and the media is, ‘back off and leave us alone, let us get on with our lives. We want to remember our friend in our own way, and we are not looking for any trouble.’

“Because the police are hanging around all the time, it creates an air of tension. It’s like a war zone, with helicopters buzzing overhead and it creates a general atmosphere of unease and intimidation. Even mothers with young children and other innocent people have had police break into their homes. Police keep raiding houses, saying they are looking for the missing driver of the stolen car, when they know very well that he is not there.

“In some streets, people are afraid to leave their houses. If they step outside the door or go to their gate, police start questioning them about what they are doing. It’s not just the young people—all the residents are facing that kind of pressure and it’s no wonder that they are feeling stressed and angry.

“For years, residents here have made complaints about the police coming into the area and victimising young people. Any time that young people go anywhere, the police follow them and stop them. Yesterday, my daughter was stopped, questioned and strip-searched on the street in Campbelltown, without any justification, when she was not doing anything.

“I believe that the government is trying to pressure people into leaving Macquarie Fields. It has a plan, like in nearby Minto, where 200 homes have been bulldozed in the past three years, of shutting down and selling off the estate to private developers, bit by bit.

“Developers want to get their hands on this land because of the population pressure. With the M5 freeway and the East Hills rail link, you can get into the airport or the city in about half an hour. It can be quite a nice area to live. There is a gated community, called Macquarie Links, not far away and so the house prices are going up.

“The government wants to flog off the land as prime real estate for rich developers to make a profit, like it is doing in Redfern [an inner city suburb where plans have been drawn up to force low-income and Aboriginal residents to leave].”



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