

# Australia: Sydney suburb remains tense following four days of conflict

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Tensions remain high in Sydney's south-western suburb of Macquarie Fields following the deaths of two teenagers in a police car chase last Friday night and four days of street fighting between police and local youth. The violent clashes—which rank among the worst civil unrest in Australia in recent memory—have laid bare both the depth of anger in working class communities over inequality, poverty and constant police harassment, and the indifference and vindictiveness of the state authorities.

Matthew Robertson, 19, and a 17-year-old young man, were killed when the allegedly stolen car they were in slammed into a tree while trying to outrun a police pursuit in Eucalyptus Drive—a major residential street in Macquarie Fields. The alleged driver, 20-year-old Jesse Kelly, survived with minor injuries and escaped the scene. Just weeks earlier, another police pursuit along Eucalyptus Drive ended with a car crashing into exactly the same tree, leaving its driver with severe injuries.

The first conflict between police and locals broke out within hours of the car crash. Grief-stricken family and friends gathered at the site and denounced the police for causing the deaths. The police had pursued the boys into the narrow residential street, at speeds approaching 140 kilometres per hour (85mph), despite reportedly knowing their identities and addresses. Local youth continue to allege that police deliberately rammed the back of the boy's vehicle, causing him to lose control.

The violence steadily escalated over the following three nights. The New South Wales (NSW) state Labor government, headed by Premier Bob Carr, responded to the obvious grief and anger in the community not with sympathy, but with condemnations and a provocative deployment of police into the area.

On Saturday and Sunday nights, hundreds of youth,

who were holding commemorations for the deceased boys, used rocks, petrol bombs and other missiles to try and prevent riot squads entering Eucalyptus Drive. Teenagers yelled “you killed our mates” as they fought with the police.

On Monday, the cops carried out a military-style assault on the streets surrounding the crash scene. From 5 p.m., dozens of officers and riot squads sealed off a section of the car park in the Glenquarie Town Centre near Eucalyptus Drive and set-up a command post. Road blocks were established at key intersections, sealing off the area. Residents attempting to drive home reported to the WSWs that police told them they would have to leave their cars and walk.

In the early evening, more than 50 police carried out an armed raid on the house where Matthew Robertson had been living, arresting three males and a young female. Over the following hours, riot squads clashed with at least 300 youth who had rallied near the entrance to Eucalyptus Drive. Police carried out baton charges and let police dogs loose on the teenagers, who fought back with bricks, rocks, golf balls and petrol bombs. By midnight, another 15 people had been arrested with at least two treated for dog bites. A number of other youth suffered injuries.

The police operation, code-named Task Force Loudon, was ordered on the demands of both the Labor and Liberal parties and the establishment media. Carr and his police minister, Carl Scully, denounced the behaviour of Macquarie Fields' residents as “riotous”, “intolerable” and “unacceptable” and announced that they had ordered the police to make further arrests. The state Liberal opposition leader, John Brogden, accused the government of taking a “softly, softly” approach and declared that the government should have sent 800 police, not 80, into the area after the fatal crash. “They

should have crushed this riot on Saturday night,” he said. “We’ve got a riot squad, let them do their job.” Monday’s editorial in *Sydney Daily Telegraph* called for the wholesale roundup of the youth who had taken part in the preceding nights of violence.

A total of 27 people in Macquarie Fields have now been arrested since Friday night, with 81 charges laid against them. In at least five cases, young men have been denied bail by the courts. There are already public accusations that detained locals have been abused by the police. Local resident Don Kelly was quoted in Tuesday’s *Sydney Morning Herald* stating that officers had “bashed the \*\*\*\*\*” out of his 17-year-old son Shane, who had been wrongly arrested on the assumption he was Jesse Kelly, the driver of the crashed car.

The past two nights have been relatively calm, with no more direct clashes in the streets. Nevertheless, there is widespread animosity in Macquarie Fields to the provocative government statements and police actions. While the government and media have attempted to present the youth taking part in the street fighting as an isolated minority, they have the sympathy of many locals. As police arrived at the Glenquarie shopping centre on Monday, dozens of people watched with hostility as the police were assembling. A man walking through the car park suddenly turned and hurled a bottle at the ground in front of a police vehicle. During the clashes that night, hundreds of people lined the sides of the street, prompting the police commissioner to denounce residents for “rubbernecking” and providing cover for the youth.

The deputy police commissioner complained: “When the police came under fire they moved forward but they were confronted by the community. Arrests were made very difficult. Often, offenders were not visible to police. People were throwing rocks from behind fences.”

Underlying the tensions are the conditions of life in the area. Macquarie Fields, situated some 40 kilometres from the centre of Sydney, is typical of the deprived working class suburbs that ring every major Australian city. The average weekly family income is \$700 to \$799, compared with the Sydney-wide average \$1,000 to \$1,199. The official unemployment rate is close to 12 percent but, in reality, only 30 percent of adults have full-time jobs. Thousands of people live in poorly

maintained public housing or equally substandard private rental accommodation. The poverty and disadvantage are the source of the social problems in the area, including petty crime and substance abuse, to which the police have responded with continuing harassment of the local youth.

Mike Head, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the seat of Werriwa—which includes Macquarie Fields—issued a press release on Monday condemning the Carr government and the police.

“Macquarie Fields and nearby suburbs include large public housing estates where only 30 percent of adults have jobs, and the homes and social facilities are severely run-down after years of funding cuts by state and federal governments. Increasingly, the only official response to this poverty and deprivation is stepped-up police harassment and repression, targetted against young people in particular. A report released last November found that 54 people died in police chases during the past decade in the state of New South Wales,” Head stated.

The SEP candidate declared that no confidence could be placed in any official inquiry into the two boy’s deaths. Carr and the police minister Scully have already placed on record their backing for the police involved in last weekend’s pursuit. Scully told the AAP news agency: “The officers who handled the (pursuit) have my support and gratitude.” Even while announcing that a coronial inquest would be conducted, Police Superintendent John Sweeney stated that the police were blameless. Police spokesmen have stated that the car chase was in accordance with police protocols.



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