

Violence against Indian students in Australia: the class issues

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Protests by Indian students in Australia over the past 12 days have brought to light an ugly under-current of violent and racist attacks that have produced outrage and deep concern among many ordinary people in both India and Australia. Once again the suppressed tensions produced by social inequality and decades of free market policies have erupted in a malignant and reactionary form with “foreigners”—this time Indian students—subjected to racist abuse and violence.

The attacks have escalated in the past several weeks. In Sydney, an apartment was firebombed, cars have been set alight and in Melbourne, amid racial taunts, another youth was brutally stabbed with a screwdriver. On May 31, Indian students responded with a 4,000-strong demonstration through the streets of Melbourne’s central business district, demanding action by police and by federal and state governments to protect their safety.

The Labor government’s initial response was one of damage-control. On June 1, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered assurances that “the more than 90,000 Indian students in Australia are welcome guests in our country”. The only thing “welcome” is the billions of dollars in fees paid by Indian students annually, part of the \$15 billion wrung from international students each year that the Rudd government fears losing.

In reality, it is successive state and federal governments—both Labor and Liberal—that are, along with police, directly responsible for the attacks on international students studying in Australia.

According to Federation of Indian Students of Australia (FISA) spokesman Gautam Gupta, bashings and other crimes against Indian students have grown steadily over

the past two years, yet complaints lodged to police have been systematically ignored, with students themselves blamed for being “soft targets”. While police have allowed muggings and bashings to proceed with impunity, this month’s student protests have received no such leniency. Police repression has been immediate, with the mobilisation of riot police, dogs and mounted police. After students and local residents assembled at railway stations in Melbourne last week, providing safe escort to young Indians arriving home by train, they were set upon by police. Such is the face of state “protection”.

It is noteworthy that Local Area Command Superintendent Robert Redfern, who led this week’s police operations in Harris Park, was also LAC chief in Cronulla during the notorious race riots that occurred there in December 2005. Under Redfern’s command, police were held back while racist and alcohol-fuelled crowds brutalised Middle Eastern youth. When the latter retaliated over ensuing days, police repression was swift. The state government passed draconian police powers through parliament and the media vilified “Lebanese gangs” for allegedly threatening “public order and safety”.

Calls have been made by demonstrators for greater police protection, but students must be warned: as in Cronulla, these demands are being seized on to justify further ruthless “law and order” policies, aimed against the entire working class. The allies of the students are not the police and the state, but the students around the country and the world, and the international working class.

“Australia” declared Rudd on June 1, just hours after police violently assaulted Indian demonstrators in Melbourne’s central business district, “is a country of

great diversity, harmony and tolerance”. On the contrary, like every other capitalist country, it is riven by enormous—and growing—class divisions.

In the suburbs surrounding Harris Park in western Sydney, and in the western suburbs of Melbourne, including St Albans, where bashings and racial victimisation are on the increase, social tensions are at breaking point, produced by more than three decades of economic restructuring. Industries, banks and offices that once employed tens of thousands of workers, were closed down during the 1980s and 1990s, condemning entire families to a life of unemployment and poverty from which they have never recovered.

Now, in the face of the worst global depression since the 1930s, unemployment is again rising, with predictions it will hit one million by next year. Over the past 12 months the number of 15-19 year olds without work has leapt from 10 to 18 percent nationally, with youth joblessness in some areas nudging 40 percent.

The Rudd government, like the Howard government before it, has responded to the deepening social crisis with the stock standard methods of Australian capitalism, seeking to shift public anger and resentment into the reactionary channels of national and race politics. Over the past 10 years, immigrants, asylum seekers, “boat people”, Muslims and “Lebanese gangs” have all become scapegoats for the failure of the profit system to provide adequate livelihoods and services to millions of ordinary people.

This week, as protests by Indian students continued, Rudd declared on Melbourne radio: “In the last decade, I was advised we had, I think, up to 20 Australians who had either been murdered or had various forms of assault committed against them. That is not the result of Australians being targeted in India, that’s just a fact of violence in cities around the world.”

Rudd and the entire political establishment seek to prevent any serious probing of why the attacks are occurring. That high levels of youth unemployment and poverty have fuelled racial tensions in Australia’s major cities is not an inevitable “fact” of life. These conditions are a product of the free market policies administered by successive capitalist governments—both Labor and Liberal—and the absence of a politically unified movement

of the working class to combat them, offering a progressive, socialist alternative. It is this that has left many young people prey to the reactionary diversions of race and nationality.

In opposition to attempts by Rudd, the police and capitalist media to divide Australian, Indian and Middle Eastern youth along racial, national and ethnic lines, with the real danger that tit-for-tat retaliatory attacks may escalate, the most advanced layers of students and working class youth must turn precisely to the development of such an internationalist and socialist movement in the working class. This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its student movement, the International Students for Social Equality.

In December 2005, in the immediate aftermath of the Cronulla race riots, Wije Dias, general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, issued a warning to youth in Australia, based on the lessons of Sri Lanka’s long and tragic experience with racial politics:

“The answer lies not in communalism, but in a class solution based on the recognition that all workers, whatever their religion, skin colour, language or ethnicity, face a common enemy: the profit system. If the working class internationally does not take the initiative and fight for the socialist restructuring of society to meet the pressing needs of the majority, the ruling class will continue to stoke up fratricidal conflict: whether it be ‘Aussies’ against ‘Lebs’ or Sinhalese against Tamils. Nothing less than the abolition of global capitalism and the construction of world socialism will ensure an end to conflict and war and guarantee basic democratic rights and a decent standard of living for all.”

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