

Australia: Indian university students protest racist attacks

Patrick O'Connor
2 June 2009

About 4,000 Indian university students protested in central Melbourne on Sunday night in opposition to a series of violent and racist attacks in recent months. The rally has focussed international attention on the issue, with the question of student safety in Australia now headline news in India. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has phoned his Australian counterpart Kevin Rudd to express his concerns.

The protest, organised by the Federation of Indian Students of Australia, began on Sunday evening with a rally outside the Royal Melbourne Hospital, where 25-year-old student Sravan Kumar Theerthala is being treated for serious head injuries. Theerthala was attacked on May 23 by a group of teenagers armed with screwdrivers. After receiving welcome news that Theerthala had come out of a coma and been taken off life support, the students marched through the city, then staged a sit down protest, blocking traffic at a busy intersection outside Flinders Street train station.

Banners and placards read: “We want justice”, “End racist attacks”, and “Racism is more dangerous than swine flu”, while the protestors chanted “Victoria Police, shame, shame!”

Indian students have long complained of police not taking their complaints of racist attacks seriously. Reports have emerged of officers refusing to formally lodge reports of criminal incidents; one student was told to simply move to another suburb to avoid further trouble. Demonstrators were also angered by deputy police commissioner Kieran Walshe’s claim last Friday that there was no evidence that recent assaults and robberies were racially motivated.

At about 5 a.m. yesterday morning, police violently broke up the protest. One witness, Swinburn Student Union President Damian Ridgwell, reported that cops stomped one student in the chest, repeatedly punched another in the head, and batoned another in the legs. According to the *Age*, La Trobe University nursing student Eric Leroy had his thumb dislocated and glasses broken by the police. Yogesh Malhotra, a banker, told the ABC that after 200 police surrounded the protestors, six

officers targeted individual students, punching them as they dragged them off the street. “There was definitely an amount of excessive force by Victoria Police,” Malhotra said.

Officers arrested 18 students, reportedly on charges of breaching the peace, while one was also accused of riotous behaviour and criminal damage.

Victorian Police Commissioner Simon Overland defended his officers’ actions. “There were blows, as I said, because arms had been linked, and there was a lot of resistance going on... If someone inadvertently got hit in the mouth and got injured I regret that, but that came about on the part of the actions of the demonstrators after they’d been given every opportunity to leave the area.”

No politician or media outlet has issued any criticisms of the vicious attack on the Indian students or on Overland’s unabashed defence of police violence. This serves to underscore the cynicism and hypocrisy of the official expressions of sympathy and concern for Indian students who have suffered from, or are fearful of, continuing racist assaults.

Senior political figures from the Labor and Liberal parties, at both the state and federal level, have rushed to issue public statements during the past 24 hours, since the student protests became headline news in India. Rudd told parliament yesterday: “I speak on behalf of all Australians when I say that we deplore and condemn these attacks.” Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull described the attacks on Indian students as an “absolute disgrace” and “un-Australian”.

In reality, the political establishment has nothing but contempt for the well-being of ordinary students, whether they are from India, Australia, or anywhere else. The attacks have been going on for months, with nothing of substance being done or said until now. The real concern is to ensure that the highly lucrative flow of education tuition payments into the country continues. International students are ruthlessly exploited, having to pay tens of thousands of dollars in tuition fees while being denied basic rights afforded to Australian

students, such as concession fares on public transport.

Education is now worth more than \$12 billion annually and ranks as Australia's third largest export, ahead of tourism and just behind coal and iron ore. Nearly 100,000 Indian youth are studying in Australia, second in number only to those from China.

Trade Minister Simon Crean has held discussions with his Indian counterpart, admitting his fear that recent violence threatened to undermine Australia's education sector. "It's not just the quality of the product, it's the safe environment in which we bring people," he declared.

Reports are surfacing of Indian parents pulling their children out of Australian universities. Recent racist attacks—not just in Melbourne but also in other cities including Sydney, where a student's home was recently firebombed—have been closely followed in India.

Last Saturday, Amitabh Bachchan, a leading Bollywood film star, declined an honorary doctorate from the Queensland University of Technology. "My conscience is profoundly unsettled at the moment and there seems to be a moral disjuncture between the suffering of these students and my own approbation," Bachchan wrote in a letter to the university.

At the same time, the opposition Hindu chauvinist BJP party has sought to gain political mileage out of the issue. Members of the BJP's youth wing staged a protest yesterday outside the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, burning an effigy of Prime Minister Rudd.

Reactionary forces in Australia are also exploiting the attacks on Indian students to advance their own agenda. Victorian Liberal leader Ted Baillieu, who addressed the protestors on Sunday evening, has launched a "law and order" campaign, demanding that the government bolster police numbers and enhance their powers. Such measures, which the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby will likely implement, will not resolve the situation confronting Indian students and will only result in even worse police harassment and violence against working class youth.

The recent assaults on students are in the final analysis, an expression of the deepening social crisis in Australia.

In the first instance, Indian students are left vulnerable because of their precarious situation. Many are unable to live anywhere near their university, due to low incomes and high inner-city accommodation costs, and are forced to travel from the more affordable outer suburbs. To support themselves, students are typically compelled to combine full time study

with long hours of paid employment as convenience store workers, taxi drivers, and other low-paid shift work. This often involves taking public transport by themselves late at night.

Most of the perpetrators of the violence against the students are reportedly young people from Melbourne's working class western suburbs. Many parts of this region have been devastated over the last two decades by mass job losses due to manufacturing plant closures. Tens of thousands of secure and full time jobs have gone, along with apprenticeships, replaced with little more than a few dwindling opportunities for young people in low paid and typically casual sectors such as retail. Deindustrialisation and permanently high unemployment has inevitably been accompanied by a slew of social problems, including alcohol and drug abuse. Many of those who have recently targeted Indian students were reportedly drug users looking to fund their addiction.

Intersecting with all this is a toxic political atmosphere in which the major parties have all promoted various forms of national chauvinism, invariably involving an undercurrent of White Australia racism. The Rudd Labor government, for example, has recently slashed the immigration intake in response to the economic crisis, thereby implying that lost jobs in Australia are the fault of too many "foreigners". At the same time, both politicians and the media have embarked on a new scare campaign over "illegal" refugees. It is no surprise, moreover, that international students have been targeted given that they have long been the victims of systematic and institutionalised discrimination in the tertiary education system.

Moves are already underfoot to pre-empt any discussion of these issues.

An editorial in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper absurdly declared: "We must be equally resolute in rejecting any idea that these attacks explain anything about Australia." On the contrary, they reveal more about the tense and violent state of social relations in contemporary capitalist Australia than the Murdoch press, and the social layers it represents, care to admit.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact