

Australian government in damage control after murder of Indian student

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The fatal stabbing of 21-year-old Indian student Nitin Garg in Melbourne on January 2 has again focussed international attention on the appalling conditions endured by many overseas students in Australia. Demonstrating its contempt for the concerns and well-being of these students, the government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has responded with a public relations campaign that has one central aim—ensuring that the multi-billion dollar tertiary education market is not adversely affected.

Nitin Garg was stabbed in the abdomen as he walked to his part-time fast-food job in West Footscray, a working class western suburb. Garg, a masters graduate who was about to begin a career in accounting, reportedly decided to walk to work for his 10 p.m. shift at Hungry Jacks. He was stabbed in a park and later died in hospital. So far, no arrests have been made, and police are continuing their investigation. Garg was reportedly not robbed, adding to concerns that the attack may have been racially motivated.

The incident recalled the spate of attacks against Indian students last year that sparked protests in Melbourne and Sydney in May and June.

Garg's murder has been followed by two other incidents involving young Indian men. The body of 25-year-old labourer and labour contractor, Ranjodh Singh, was found near the New South Wales town of Griffith. One report linked his murder to the issue of unpaid wages in the notoriously exploitative fruit picking industry. Two Indian seasonal workers were reportedly arrested at Sydney airport last week but later released without charge after surrendering their passports.

The other incident involved 29-year-old Jaspreet Singh who was the target of an alleged arson attack in the northern Melbourne suburb of Essendon. Singh, who is recovering from burns in hospital, told police that four men doused him in fluid and set him alight as he was getting out of his car. Police, however, told the media that the incident was "a bit strange". Singh's family denied his injuries were self-inflicted.

Nitin Garg's death sparked a furore in India. Authorities in New Delhi issued a new travel advisory warning Indian students against going to Australia. India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna declared Garg's murder a "heinous crime on humanity" and "an uncivilised brutal attack on innocent Indians". Krishna spoke with Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith last Monday, warning that "non-redressal of this vital issue will cast a shadow on our otherwise excellent bilateral relations".

The Indian *Daily Mail* published a cartoon depicting an Australian police officer in Ku Klux Klan garb, saying, "We are yet to ascertain the nature of the crime". The image reflected widespread hostility among Indian students toward the Victorian state police for their attempt to downplay the incident and suggest that the murder was not racially motivated.

Acting Prime Minister Julia Gillard leapt to the defence of the police, declaring that the cartoon was "deeply offensive". She stated: "In big cities around the world we do see acts of violence from time to time; that happens in Melbourne, it happens in Mumbai, it happens in New York, it happens in London."

Gillard's comments echo Rudd's reference last June to the "fact of violence in cities around the world". The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time: "Rudd's statement is little short of incitement to further racist attacks against Indian students. According to the prime minister, racist attacks against foreign nationals must be accepted as 'a fact' of life." (See: "Indian student protests spread to Sydney: 'We came here to study, not to fight'")

Acting Foreign Minister Simon Crean declared the day after Garg's death that "there is no evidence" of any racial motivation. "The question of simply Indians being targeted... hasn't been borne out by the facts," he said. Crean's statements amount to an improper and potentially prejudicial intervention into an ongoing police investigation.

Crean's concern, like that of the Labor government as a

whole, is one of damage control. The government's response demonstrates nothing but contempt for the welfare and safety of university students, whether they are Indian, Australian, or any other nationality. Instead, its preoccupation is to ensure no damage is done to the private education market, which is valued at \$17 billion annually and represents Australia's third largest export industry, behind coal and iron ore.

The number of Indian students planning to come to Australia had already dropped sharply, even before the latest incidents. The Australian immigration department reported a 46 percent decline—from 20,557 applications to 11,183—in Indian student visa applications to Australia from July to October 2009, compared with the same period in 2008. The decline is significantly greater than the overall drop in international student visa applications of 26 percent.

The decline in Indian student numbers is bound up with several factors. The Rudd government has imposed more restrictive visa requirements, including that students have access to personal savings of \$18,000, up from the previous \$12,000. Moreover, several dubious private vocational education institutions in Melbourne and Sydney have abruptly shut down in recent months, forcing students to cancel their studies and return to India. There is no question, however, that the widespread publicity of last year's racist attacks has contributed to the decline.

There are also fears for the tourism industry. According to an estimate issued last month by Australia's Tourism Forecasting Committee, there will be 4,000 fewer Indian arrivals in 2010—a decline of 21 percent—compared to a growth of 4.3 percent in overall international tourism numbers.

The Labor government's increasingly frenzied efforts to downplay the security concerns of Indian students are being conducted on behalf of the substantial business interests at stake in the education and tourism sectors.

Irrespective of whether Nitin Garg's killer or killers were driven by racial animosity toward Indians or foreigners, the circumstances of the young student's death point to the terrible conditions endured by international students in Australia.

Garg was living in overcrowded accommodation. He shared a house in the working class suburb of Newport with seven other young Indians. With no government assistance and little, if any, help provided by university administrations, many students are forced to live in the less expensive outer suburbs of major cities, often far away from their campuses. These working class areas have been devastated by decades of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring engineered by successive Labor and Liberal governments. Entrenched unemployment, especially for

young people, and the myriad accompanying social problems, including drug and alcohol abuse, have led to an increase in violent crime.

Many international students work in low-wage, insecure casual and part-time jobs, including in 24-hour convenience stores and fast food outlets, in order to cope with housing and other living expenses. These jobs often involve night shifts that force students to take public transport alone late at night. As in the case of Nitin Garg, a large proportion of the attacks suffered by Indian students have occurred while they were travelling to or from work. According to his housemates, Garg had previously been attacked by drunken youths at Newport train station last March.

The Rudd government has made no proposals to assist international students financially and with their housing, work and access to safe public transport. International students are regarded as nothing more than cash cows for the private education operators. They are subjected to institutionalised discrimination in the university system—forced to pay exorbitant tuition fees several times higher than those charged to Australian students, and denied basic rights including student concessions on public transport, access to Medicare, and income support.

The state Labor government and the Victorian police have seized on the latest violent incident to step up repressive measures. A few days after Garg's killing, around 25 police, with media in tow, launched a "stop and search" operation at Footscray train station. They conducted random metal detector body and bag searches, utilising for the first time draconian new legislation that allows police to conduct such searches without warrant or even a reasonable ground for concern.



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