Australia: Teenage girl assaulted by train ticket inspectors

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The release this month of video footage showing a 15-year-old girl being violently tackled by a Metro Trains ticket inspector at Melbourne's Flinders Street Station has highlighted the impunity with which public transport security personnel harass and assault working-class youth.

The CCTV footage of the assault at Melbourne's Flinders Street Station, which occurred on July 31, shows the teenager, who cannot be named because of her age, slipping through an open gate in an apparent attempt to evade a $1.75 train fare. She was then grabbed from behind by a male ticket inspector. The girl can be seen recoiling from him and then apparently attempting to resist his grasp by slapping him. She is pushed against the gate, lifted off the ground and spun upside down while being slammed to the ground, head first.

This kind of "spear tackle" has long been banned in rugby and other sports, after several incidents caused permanent paralysis and even death from head and spinal injuries.

Further disturbing video of the Flinders Street incident, captured by a commuter after the initial tackle, shows the girl being pinned to the ground face down by three inspectors, two of whom are on top of her, for more than seven minutes. On the ground, the girl protested that she could not breathe, was only fifteen, and had previously suffered sexual abuse. Some 10 or so other Metro inspectors and staff, Protective Service Officers, and police, can be seen surrounding them, looking on.

Two of the girl's teenage friends were also physically restrained and assaulted when they attempted to defend her. One of them was held against a fence by her neck from behind, then had her hair pulled and her head yanked against the fence by an enraged inspector after she spat towards him. He then held her in a headlock for almost three minutes, assisted by two police officers who ignored the protests of several commuters who were outraged by what they saw.

None of the ticket inspectors involved in the incident has faced criminal charges, or other sanctions. An internal investigation by private train operator Metro Trains deemed the inspectors had acted in accordance with company policy. A state government investigation carried out by the Department of Transport also whitewashed the incident, finding the inspector "exercised his functions as an authorised officer (ticket inspector) reasonably."

State Liberal government Transport Minister Terry Mulder justified the assault, declaring "it's alright… for you to say let's hold them by the arm, but if someone is swinging a punch at you and trying to kick you and spit in your face then I suggest some other form of restraint is necessary."

While the ticket inspectors were defended, the girl and one of her friends have been charged with assault-related offences and fare evasion and will face the Children's Court.

It has since been revealed that the teenager is under the guardianship of Anglicare, Victoria's largest family-welfare provider that assists many children who are unable to live at home because of family neglect or abuse.

Anglicare CEO Paul McDonald told the *Age* that the girl was "visibly traumatised" by the assault, and he condemned the actions of the inspectors. "Many of the young people attempting to evade fares come from disadvantaged backgrounds," he said. "They may be living in foster care or have a history of abuse and are in desperate need of positive examples of adult behaviour. The last thing they need is another lesson in

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violence."

He added: "That is a message to all the other members of Metro that they can act like this, where the force was clearly over-physical, heavy-handed and quite appalling."

The violent incident at Flinders Station was not an aberration. Working-class youth are systematically targeted and harassed by ticket inspectors, security personnel, and police, who know they are essentially immune from prosecution. While successive state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal, have provided grossly inadequate funding for basic recreational, sporting, and cultural facilities for young people, vast resources have been allocated for stepped up policing and security operations. Young people congregating in shopping centres, around train stations, or in other public places are frequently dealt with as a threat and targeted.

Melbourne's ticket inspectors are notorious for their thuggery. They play an important role in maintaining the profits of the companies that have run the train system since it was privatised in the 1990s. The public transport system selloff was accompanied by the introduction of an automated ticketing system. Thousands of tram conductors and station staff who previously sold tickets and provided assistance to passengers were sacked.

Responding to complaints by the private operators that fare evasion was contributing to their difficulties in generating sufficient profits, the former state Labor government allowed the companies to employ ticket inspectors, effectively serving as a private revenue-raising police force. Their numbers have steadily expanded since, as have their powers. Now more than 600 ticket inspectors are allowed to physically restrain and detain commuters until police arrive.

Secret focus group research commissioned in 2008 under the former Labor government, released only after a freedom of information request, revealed widespread public hostility to the inspectors. They were variously described as "power hungry, intimidating, scary, nasty, evil, horrible, harassing, inflexible, and deceitful."

The Victorian ombudsman released a report in 2010 on the situation, finding that "authorised officers and their managers are clearly not aware of the limitations on the appropriate use of their powers." The Ombudsman released CCTV footage showing numerous examples of "inappropriate authorised officer conduct and excessive use of force." In one incident, an inspector pushed two young men from a moving train.

In 2012, Channel 7 News spoke with eight former and serving ticket inspectors who confirmed they were given infringement quotas to meet, and had been told to target teenage girls because they were least likely to resist.

The situation has since been exacerbated by the current Liberal government's introduction of a new tier of security personnel, to both reinforce the ticket inspection regime and augment the police force. New Protective Service Officers (PSOs) have the power to fine, search, apprehend and arrest people in and around railway stations. They are given just 12 weeks training before being issued with capsicum spray, batons, Tasers and firearms. Just over 500 PSOs now man 79 stations across the city from 6 p.m. until the end of train services, with plans to roll out 940 more.

The security build-up forms part of the wider preparations of the ruling class to crack down on social unrest and opposition as economic tensions sharpen and social inequality further escalates.

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