Australia: Reactionary “law and order” campaign follows fatal assault on teenager

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The tragic death of 18-year-old Daniel Christie last Saturday as a result of an apparently random assault on New Year’s Eve has been seized on by leading politicians, state and federal alike, and the corporate media, to demand greater police powers and a punitive response against young people involved in “alcohol-fuelled” violence.

Christie was struck to the head—“king hit” or “coward punched” in the loaded media terms for an unprovoked assault—at around 9 p.m. on December 31 in Sydney’s King’s Cross, an inner-city area populated by dozens of bars and nightclubs. He suffered irreversible injuries, including a fractured skull and bleeding on the brain, and his family turned off his life support on January 11.

Shaun McNeil, a 25-year-old building worker, allegedly struck Christie and his brother after becoming involved in an altercation with three underage youths. McNeil has reportedly claimed that the youths tried to sell him drugs, and had hid behind the Christie brothers, whom they did not know.

McNeil was initially charged with various serious assault offenses but, amid the “law and order” clamour in the media, murder was added this week.

Christie was the 91st person to die in Australia as a result of unprovoked physical assaults since 2000. New South Wales has the highest fatality rate, with 28 deaths. The incident took place just metres from where Thomas Kelly, 18, was attacked in July 2012 by a drunken 19-year-old youth. Kelly also died as a result of his injuries.

Australia’s political and media establishment immediately swung into action following the Christie assault, feigning concern about escalating random violence incidents and fulminating against drunken or drug-affected “young thugs.”

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott weighed in with an editorial comment last Friday in the Murdoch-owned tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*. The emergence of alcohol-related violence, he declared, was a product of “binge drinking culture” and “the rise of the disturbed individual who goes out ... looking for a victim.” He called for harsher police measures and sentencing, insisting that courts must “throw the book” at individual offenders.

All of this “law and order” demagogy is designed to cover up the deeper social causes that produce “disturbed individuals.” The politicians and media pundits demanding draconian police measures are themselves responsible for the social crisis that is fuelling the growth of self-destructive alcohol and drug abuse and a culture of individual violence.

An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* went out of its way to absolve the present social order by blaming a “culture of self-indulgent thuggishness” that had emerged “despite a high standard of living and high employment.”

For anyone acquainted with the social conditions confronting broad sections of the population—mass job destruction, endemic poverty and growing social inequality—this claim is a cruel joke. Young people, especially those from working-class areas, have grown up in the context of a profoundly brutal society with a decades-long assault on jobs, conditions, and wages and the gutting of social programs.

Contrary to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, many Australian youth are condemned to a future of long-term unemployment or low-paid casual or part-time work. The understated official jobless rate for 15- to 24-year-olds is 12.3 percent and more than double that in most working-class suburbs. More than a quarter of young people aged 17 to 24 in Australia are not enrolled in full-time study or work. Those not living at

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home are dependent on the so-called Youth Allowance of $172 per week, which is well under the poverty line.

This is a global phenomenon. In the five and a half years since the 2008 crash, youth unemployment in most of advanced capitalist countries has reached Depression-era levels. Throughout Europe, youth unemployment is at epidemic levels—in Greece more than two-thirds of youth are unemployed—and in the US the youth unemployment rates is 16.2 percent, more than twice the official rate for the population as a whole. According to the International Labour Organization, global youth unemployment will continue to rise for at least the next four years.

While poverty does not automatically generate violent assaults and substance abuse, the sense of hopelessness, despair and frustration that it inevitably creates are essential ingredients in the emergence of various forms of anti-social and self-destructive behaviour, including increasing youth suicide rates. In Queensland, the youth suicide rate reached its highest recorded level last year, while over the past four years suicide has become the leading cause of sudden death amongst Western Australian teenagers.

The increasing regularity of random assaults and alcohol and drug abuse is indicative of a deep-going malaise in Australian society and one for which the capitalist profit system and its political servants—Labor, Liberal and Greens alike—and the corporate media are entirely responsible.

Along with the deepening social gulf between rich and poor, the past two decades have been characterised by the glorification of militarism, increasing levels of violence perpetrated by the state, and the brutalisation of every aspect of government policy.

The criminal and predatory US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have spanned almost the entire conscious lives of millions of young people. The same Labor and Liberal politicians who inveigh against individual violence are directly complicit in war crimes carried out against the Iraqi and Afghan populations on a mass scale. Australian soldiers serving in military assassination squads in Afghanistan are regularly hailed by state authorities and the media as heroes and exemplars of the “Australian spirit.”

At the same time, the Australia political establishment has allocated $140 million for a wide-ranging “celebration” of the centenary of World War I, proclaiming Australia’s participation in the imperialist slaughter as a historic struggle for “nationhood.” This obscene glorification of past wars is the preparation to dragoon young people into new ones.

Likewise, the past decade has seen the conscious promotion of retributive and gratuitous acts of individual violence in film, television and video games. Young people have been bombarded with propaganda on the “virtues” of ruthless individualism—the inevitable converse of which is contempt for those deemed “weak” or “failures.”

While masses of working people and youth are dissatisfied with the existing situation, and recognise the imperviousness of the political establishment to their needs and aspirations, these sentiments as yet find no outlet in a mass movement for progressive social change. All the organisations to which the working class once gave its allegiance—the Labor Party and the trade unions—have been transformed into the most ruthless proponents of the agenda of the corporate elite.

In this toxic environment the emergence of various forms of anti-social behaviour is inevitable. Daniel Christie’s death is another terrible product of a decaying social order—the profit system—which offers young people nothing but a future of unemployment, poverty and war.

The only way this can be changed is by youth taking up a socialist perspective to put an end to the capitalist system, replacing it with a genuinely humane society which fundamentally reorganises social and economic life according to human need, not the enrichment of a tiny elite.

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