

Australia: Ten years since Aboriginal youth TJ Hickey killed in police chase

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Yesterday marked the tenth anniversary of the death of TJ Hickey, a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy, in the inner Sydney area of Redfern-Waterloo.

TJ died after he crashed his bicycle and was impaled on a metal fence while he was being pursued by police. The incident triggered a night-long clash between local Aboriginal people and riot police, dubbed the “Redfern riot” by the media. The officers involved in TJ’s death subsequently attempted to cover up their responsibility, concocting false formal statements and lying under oath during a coronial inquest as they denied having chased the youth. None of those involved have faced any disciplinary action, let alone criminal charges, in the ten years since the incident.

Neither have any of the underlying social issues bound up with TJ’s life and death been resolved. Aborigines remain the most oppressed layer of the Australian working class, and indigenous youth remain subjected to police violence and harassment, unemployment, poverty, and official neglect.

TJ Hickey’s short life was representative of an entire generation of Aboriginal youth. He grew up in the rural town of Walgett in northwest New South Wales, but left for Sydney soon after he dropped out of school aged 14 and struggled to find anything other than menial and casual agricultural labouring jobs. Like other regional centres, Walgett has few jobs for young people and virtually no social and recreational infrastructure. More than a decade since TJ Hickey left the town, nothing has changed for young Aboriginal people. Official statistics for 2013 show that the median income for Aboriginal people in Walgett is just \$284, the official unemployment rate is 21 percent, and 30.5 percent of indigenous homes are classed as overcrowded.

In Sydney, TJ went to Redfern, which had long served as a meeting centre for Aboriginal people coming to the city. Within days of his arrival, TJ was assaulted by police, in a reported case of “mistaken identity.” Such experiences are typical for young Aborigines in Redfern, who face constant police surveillance and intimidation. TJ was subsequently involved in various petty crimes and had faced a children’s court on charges of stealing, resisting police, and possession of a small quantity of marijuana.

On the morning of his death, TJ crossed paths with two police

vehicles who were searching for a suspect, who like TJ was Aboriginal and wearing dark clothing and had snatched a bag in the area earlier that day. When they saw TJ, the police engaged in an aggressive pursuit, with one vehicle mounting a kerb at the end of a cul-de-sac and following TJ down a pedestrian footpath. Cycling as fast as he could to avoid the police, the youth came off his bike and tragically landed on a fence. His terrible injuries may have been exacerbated by the subsequent actions of the police, who, in violation of first aid protocol, lifted him off the fence and placed him on the ground before ambulance personnel arrived on the scene.

That evening, around 200 police descended on the predominantly Aboriginal area of Redfern known as “The Block.” Angry residents responded to this provocation by engaging in a night-long standoff, throwing rocks, fireworks, and other missiles at the police.

The media responded with a hysterical “law and order” campaign against those involved in the so-called riot. Police retaliated with a series of arrests, including of TJ’s aunt, cousin, and 14-year-old girlfriend. Several relatives were refused bail to attend his funeral in Walgett, and TJ’s father was similarly denied a day leave pass from Bathurst jail to mourn his son.

The entire political establishment rushed to back the police and denounce the Aboriginal community in Redfern. On February 27, before there had been any investigation into TJ’s death, Prime Minister John Howard declared there was no evidence he had been chased, adding: “I think the allegations that have been made against the police are unreasonable and I defend very much the position of the police in a situation like that.”

New South Wales Labor premier Bob Carr, who went on to serve as foreign minister under Julia Gillard’s federal government, similarly declared: “I have made it very, very clear right from the start, our full 100 percent backing for the police in Redfern—there can be no doubt about that.” Carr flatly denied any need to investigate the poverty and social problems confronting Aboriginal people in the inner Sydney area, stating: “I’ll tell you what needs to be done in Redfern—the arrest of the criminals who produced the situation there on Sunday night and Monday morning.”

Enjoying a green light given from the federal and state governments, the police involved in TJ's death got off scot-free. Evidence and testimony that emerged in the course of a coronial inquest exposed the police collusion and attempted cover up of their high speed pursuit of TJ before his death. But the coroner's report was an abject whitewash that exonerated the police via a series of ludicrous alibis and excuses for the officers involved.

In the decade since, police authorities have maintained a vindictive hostility towards the Hickey family. They have blocked the placement of a commemorative plaque at the fence where TJ died, on the grounds that the proposed inscription states that he was impaled as a result of a "police pursuit." Gail Hickey, TJ's mother, told a rally yesterday that was held to mark the tenth anniversary of his death: "I want justice and the truth to come out for what happened."

In 2004, as part of the official response to TJ's death, the New South Wales government commissioned a parliamentary report purportedly to examine social and policing issues in Redfern-Waterloo and recommend "reforms." This was merely used, however, to justify a further police build up in the area, including a new \$6 million, seven-storey police station, staffed with an additional 46 officers.

Redfern, located near Sydney's central business district, was already being gentrified in 2004, but the subsequent property boom and government urban planning measures aimed at developing the area for a layer of the upper-middle class vastly accelerated the process. The median house price in Redfern is now just under \$1 million. Aboriginal people have been systematically driven out, with The Block effectively destroyed. Part of it has been revamped for the private rental market—the row of terrace houses on Eveleigh Street in front of which Aboriginal youth clashed with the police after TJ's death are now being leased for between \$1,000 and \$1,200 a week. In the rest of The Block, the squalid houses that state authorities left to rot over the last two decades have been demolished. New townhouses and units are to be developed, with a token Aboriginal presence maintained while lucrative student accommodation and commercial spaces are promoted.

The project is being developed by a layer of local Aboriginal bureaucrats that have long been cultivated by state and federal governments. A rival section of local Aboriginal "community leaders", assiduously promoted by the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance, has sought to divert anger and opposition by promoting black nationalist identity politics, attempting to cover up the class issues involved by insisting that the sole problem is "white racism." These layers dominated the commemoration rally yesterday, promoting the call for the government to open a Royal Commission into TJ's death. This is aimed at deflecting continued anger over what happened by promoting illusions in official inquiries that been repeatedly utilised by the ruling class to whitewash its crimes against Aboriginal people.

The police harassment of Aboriginal youth was always bound up with an anti-working class agenda. In Redfern and surrounding areas, the reality is that all working class and poor people, not just those who are also Aboriginal, are being deliberately driven out. In Waterloo, the two high-rise public housing towers that overlook the site where TJ died have been systematically neglected, with authorities refusing to carry out basic repairs and maintenance, including to plumbing systems that regularly flood people's apartments. Under "redevelopment" plans underway, public housing estates in the area are being bulldozed to make way for new mixed private and "social" units. Hundreds of people, including the elderly and mentally ill, are being uprooted and shifted to outlying Sydney suburbs.

The situation a decade on from TJ Hickey's tragic death underscores the class issues involved. Australian capitalism was founded on the systematic destruction of indigenous society, with its communal system of land use incompatible with the profit system and its private ownership of the means of production. Aborigines were subsequently exploited as the most oppressed layer of the Australian working class. The ruling class now trumpets its aim of "closing the gap" between the income, education, health and other conditions of life for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society—but the most fundamental "gap" in society is a class and not a race one. The poverty and degradation inflicted on the indigenous population is just the most graphic expression of the social onslaught being carried out on all sections of the working class amid a worsening breakdown of the global capitalist system. The only viable response is the development of a revolutionary and socialist movement that unites all working people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, in a fight to overthrow the profit system and its political representatives.

In 2004, the World Socialist Web Site extensively examined the social and political issues behind TJ Hickey's death. The following articles are among the most important:

TJ Hickey and the plight of young Aboriginal Australians

Government and media attack Aboriginal community after Redfern riot

Police involvement in death of Aboriginal youth exposed

Coroner's findings whitewash police role in death of TJ Hickey

Following TJ Hickey's death: Australian parliamentary report rubberstamps police buildup in Redfern



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