

Australia: Workers and youth speak on Ferguson, Missouri and police violence

A reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with students, workers and youth in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane last weekend about the execution-style killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Many relayed their own experiences of police brutality and linked it to the growth of poverty and social problems.

Youth unemployment in some Australian cities has reached European levels due to decades of deindustrialisation and restructuring under successive Labor and Liberal governments. In the Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows, official unemployment is 16 percent and the rate for young people is 53 percent due to the downsizing of the local Ford plant and closure of other key industries.

Though largely unreported, police harassment is an everyday reality for youth in working class suburbs. On December 14 last year, three Queensland police officers assaulted a 19-year-old unarmed man in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane. The violent attack became public only because a passer-by videoed the incident. Before any investigation had concluded, Queensland Police Union President Ian Leavers stated that the officers “acted in an entirely professional, appropriate and responsible manner” and that their actions would be “completely vindicated” by an internal investigation.

Interviews obtained by the WSWs show that such incidents are far more common.

In the South Brisbane suburb of Inala, where unemployment is 24.6 percent, **Nigel**, an Aboriginal worker and boilermaker by trade, immediately identified with the people of Ferguson, Missouri. “It happens a lot here too. It’s not only the Aboriginal people; it’s the poor and that’s the class system,” he said.

“There is a class system in Australia but it’s not so advertised and well-known as it is in other countries. In India, you can walk out of the Taj Mahal, where all the rich people are, and see people begging. You can walk

past multi-million-dollar mansions and see people picking food out of bins ... The gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider in Australia and that’s because of government policies and legislation.

“The police have broken a few laws in Ferguson, Missouri in my opinion. They’re acting like judge, jury and executioner and that’s not right. It does happen here too, but it just gets swept under the carpet and blamed on other people.”

Nigel spoke about a recent case in Western Australia, where police killed a promising “Grade A” Aboriginal student. “The police hit him, ran over his body and then got together and tried to say he was drunk and causing a ruckus in the street, which was complete nonsense. Police covered up and lied, and now it’s going through an inquiry.”

Liban, in Broadmeadows, said: “If a cop or a security guard on duty kills someone, they can go and say afterward they have mental health issues, and then they will get paid to stay home for the rest of their lives.

“America wants to point the finger at other countries and say they are dictatorships, but the real dictatorship is in America. Look at America’s own homeland, with all the poor people and the people who need health care.

“Look at what has happened in the Middle East. President Bush went to war in Iraq, saying that Saddam Hussein was a terrorist and that he had weapons of mass destruction. There was nothing there. If the leader of an African country did the sort of killing the US does, they would put him in jail, but Bush is not in jail.”

Andrew, a film and television student and part-time retail worker, spoke to the WSWs at Ringwood, in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. “The response of the American government clearly represents its attitude towards the opinion of its citizens. They don’t trust them to make their own decisions,” he said.

“From what I’ve heard about Obama, the American

people are about as happy with him as we are with Tony Abbott. Rather than doing what he should to get rid of the gap between the ridiculously rich and the ridiculously poor, he's widened it and that's one of the reasons why you would have incidents like that shooting happening.

"The government here hasn't done nearly enough to accommodate the poorer Australians and there are definite parallels here with what's happening in America. If it's happening in America, what's to stop it happening in Australia?"

In the Sydney suburb of Maroubra, **Alvin**, a 17-year-old public relations student, said he was constantly pulled over by police. "It's mainly if I'm coming back from girlfriends late at night. Last night I got pulled up and all I was doing was walking back home through the city. They pulled me over, saying that apparently someone that looks like me and dresses like me has drugs on them."

Alvin, who was homeless in Brisbane before moving to Sydney, said: "I think they should give everyone a fair go. It's really bad. They've got to help young people to get off the street. Nowadays they're trying to cut down on the payments for youth, which is pretty unfair because what if they don't have a family helping them and supporting them? It's pretty sad but you can't just keep the poor poor and make them live on the street."

Accounting student and part-time actor **Bilal**, 22, said: "I've been using trains in Sydney for over 10 years and most of that time the transit officers on the train were just normal uniformed ticket inspectors and they didn't have any sort of apprehension tools.

"A couple of years ago they decided to remove the transit officers and just put normal cops on the trains. Now, if you're sitting on the train with your family you see three or four cops go by with their big belts with the baton hanging and the Taser and the cuffs and the gun. There hasn't been a case of shooting on a train by the police, but I guess it is a matter of time before statistics like the US come down here."

Aguer, a South Sudanese community leader based in Melbourne, is attempting to establish an African Community Legal Centre. "I've been trying to help the South Sudanese young people, attending court with them, attending interviews at the police station. The same thing that happens in America happens here. It's no different," he said.

"Our children are being followed by police and they jail them for no particular reason. The police have more authority than anyone else; they've given them too many powers. This has created a big problem. The judges are

being convinced by the police that this fellow has done wrong and has to be jailed, and the judges just agree with the police."

South Sudanese youth, he said, "get arrested for things like jay-walking ... Many other times there's no particular reason why they're arrested. Just for walking around. I get stopped all the time by the police asking me why I'm standing around. The other day I was standing at Flinders Street station and two police came up and wanted to know what I was doing and to move on. I wasn't doing anything."

Arop, a community development student at Victoria University, said: "I'm from South Sudan where there is actually a lot of violence, but you don't hear where the police just shoot people in public for everyone to see. It's a different sort of violence to what you see in the US.

"These laws they want to impose on the population from the budget will impact on the poorest. It will hit the Australian people, the poorest and migrants. There will be more turning to crime as a result. The police will likely be targeting young people more."

In Broadmeadows, **Chris**, a young meatworker, said: "I saw [the Ferguson police attacks] on TV and thought it was wrong. I wouldn't have a clue why the police did it. They said he stole something but even if that's true, it's not worth killing somebody over. It's still crazy.

"More than likely it happens here as well. When I was in Bendigo a month ago the police picked up a 17-year-old and body slammed him into the ground. Apparently he didn't have a ticket and spat at a PSO [Protective Services Officer]. That doesn't justify it. The coppers had six kids in the back of their divvy van.

"There's a lot of unemployment in Broadmeadows—to keep people living pretty much like slaves. It's very unfortunate in this day and age. That's why everybody is selling drugs and stealing, and if you ask me that's the way the government makes it. But fighting against the police and the government, you won't win by yourself. The system needs to change."



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