

Australian prison riot highlights spiralling detention rates

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Several hundred prisoners at the Melbourne Remand Centre staged a violent protest last week over a total smoking ban imposed at the facility. The incident points to the unprecedented increase of Australia's prison population in the past decade, and the overcrowded conditions in which thousands of prisoners are detained.

The protest lasted about 15 hours, beginning on Tuesday at midday, the day before smoking was prohibited. About 300 prisoners at the 1,000-bed facility, which is filled to capacity, reportedly lit fires inside prison buildings and torched prison vehicles. Most inmates in the remand centre are still awaiting trial.

Details on what happened remain scarce, and reports from Victoria's prison authorities and the commercial media must be viewed with skepticism. According to these sources, however, the inmates armed themselves with makeshift weapons, including wooden planks and metal bars, ripped down an internal fence and destroyed prison administration buildings.

Three prison officers reportedly suffered "minor injuries" before the facility's 200 staff were evacuated. Heavily-armed police used tear gas to storm the facility, regaining control at 3.30 a.m. on Wednesday. Five prisoners were injured, with two receiving treatment for dog bites and another suffering a broken jaw.

Despite the crackdown, protests continued, with more small fires reportedly lit in the prison on Wednesday and Thursday. Several fires were also lit last week in protest over the smoking ban at high-security Port Phillip Prison, prompting a statewide prison lockdown.

Victoria is one of several Australian states to have imposed smoking bans in prisons. The move has been justified on the basis of protecting the health of inmates

and prison staff—but this pretext is belied by the dismal level of healthcare provided to prisoners. The prison authorities' real agenda is to create another mechanism to humiliate and punish detainees, 85 percent of whom smoke.

Officials with Corrections Victoria, the body responsible for running the state's 13 prisons, have claimed they had no prior intelligence of any protest or riot. These statements have been contradicted by multiple sources. The smoking ban was preceded by the cessation on June 12 of cigarette and tobacco sales within the prison, a move that reportedly fuelled tensions. The *Herald Sun* reported that in the days before the violence, 200 men refused to return to their cells in protest over the smoking ban. The newspaper also reported that one prison guard told their spouse that a riot was going to occur.

These reports raise the question as to whether prison authorities permitted the unrest to erupt, in order to justify a violent crackdown.

Victoria's Acting Premier James Merlino staged a photo opportunity for the media inside the Melbourne Remand Centre on the day after the riot. "What I saw was both shocking and disgraceful," he declared.

The state's Labor government announced an inquiry into the incident, to be conducted by former police deputy commissioner Kieran Walshe. The inquiry, due to conclude by November, will be nothing but a whitewash, justifying further repressive measures within the prison system while covering up the underlying social and political issues behind the riot.

The smoking ban provided the immediate trigger for the prisoners' protest, but skyrocketing inmate numbers and deteriorating conditions have created an explosive crisis throughout Australia's prison system. Every state and federal election in the past period has

involved a reactionary “law and order” bidding war between the Labor and Liberal parties, with each pledging to extend prison sentences, reduce bail opportunities and boost police and prison guard numbers.

The outcome is a record prison population. Between 1945 and 1985, the national rate of imprisonment was relatively stable, averaging 65 prisoners per 100,000 adults. In the past two decades, however, the number of prisoners has more than doubled and the rate is now 194 per 100,000 people.

Of all the Australian states, Victoria has recorded the fastest growth in prison numbers. Last year there were more than 6,100 prisoners, up from 3,600 in 2004. This was despite police statistics recording that the 2013–14 crime rate was 1.6 percent lower than a decade earlier. The spike in imprisonment was especially rapid between 2009 and 2014, when the number of inmates increased by an extraordinary 40.5 percent as a result of the former state Liberal government’s draconian “tough on crime” measures. These included more stringent conditions for parole applications, similar changes to bail laws, and the elimination of suspended sentences.

The current Labor government, elected last November, has retained all these measures and further boosted police numbers.

The prison population is projected to reach more than 7,100 by mid-2015. Every prison in the state has expansion plans, and the Labor government is proceeding with its predecessor’s planned for-profit construction of a \$670 million, 1,300-bed prison in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

This Public Private Partnership project was awarded to GEO Consortium, which has constructed several prisons across Australia. The consortium is a subsidiary of the US-based Geo Group, which manages or owns 106 prisons in the US, Britain, Australia, and South Africa, and last year reported revenues of \$1.7 billion. “We continue to be optimistic regarding the growth opportunities in our industry,” CEO George Zoley declared when announcing the 2014 financial results.

While private corporations reap fortunes from the semi-privatised prison industry, inmates’ basic needs are systematically neglected.

Prisons are now dangerously overcrowded. In Victoria and other states, fold-up beds and double

bunking in rooms designed for single occupants, and three or more prisoners in cells designed for two, are common. At the low-security Dhurringile prison in rural Victoria, 100 prisoners are housed in modified shipping containers, while another area for visitors during the day is converted to a bedroom for 10 prisoners on fold-up beds at night.

Overcrowding has led to more prison assaults and self-harm episodes. Between 2009 and 2013, the assault rate jumped from 14.1 to 18.7 per 100 prisoners annually, while self-harm incidents more than doubled, from 4.1 to 8.3 per 100 prisoners.

Prisoners are overwhelmingly drawn from the most impoverished and oppressed layers of the working class.

People suffering mental health problems are among those affected. Some mentally ill people affected by psychosis or other conditions that find expression in violent or destructive acts can find no adequate treatment or support as a result of slashed healthcare budgets. Instead of being treated as patients requiring care, they are targeted by the authorities for imprisonment. Recent studies have found that about one in three people taken into police custody are receiving psychiatric treatment. A Victorian ombudsman report found that 55 percent of the state’s prisoners are at risk of suicide or self-harm, while 42 percent have a psychiatric risk rating.

Prisoners are similarly neglected when leaving the system. Approximately 90 percent of those released in Victoria receive no assistance whatsoever in making a successful transition out of jail.

The situation stands as a damning indictment of the ruling elite and its parliamentary representatives, including the Labor, Liberal, and Greens parties. Amid a worsening economic crisis and mounting social inequality, the entire political establishment has nothing to offer working people and youth except the threat of repression and imprisonment.



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