

Workers and young people speak out against the demonization of Muslim youth in Australia

Our reporters
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On Saturday, reporters from the WSWs spoke with workers and young people in Sydney's western suburbs about the hysterical campaign of vilification directed against Muslim youth, in the wake of a highly publicized shooting incident at New South Wales police headquarters in Parramatta on October 2.

Since Farhad Jabar, a 15-year-old schoolboy from a Kurdish Iraqi background shot and killed a police accountant outside the headquarters, the entire political establishment, led by Coalition Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the Labor Party opposition, the police and the corporate press, have insisted that it constituted an act of "Islamic terrorism."

On a daily basis, politicians, self-styled "terrorism experts" and media pundits intone against the supposed threat posed by "youth radicalization," and "Islamic extremism," citing Jabar's actions as proof of what they claim to be a widespread threat to the "Australian way of life." In reality, nothing is known about Jabar's motives. He was shot and killed by police outside the station during the tragic incident.

The official response is in line with long-standing efforts to demonize Muslim youth, aimed at legitimizing Australia's involvement in US-led wars in the Middle East, including the current bombing of Iraq and Syria, and further eroding the democratic rights of the entire population under the rubric of the fraudulent "war on terror."

Following the shooting, hundreds of heavily armed police raided homes in the western suburbs, arresting five Muslim youth, none of whom have been charged with any offence. Many of Jabar's schoolmates have been treated as little more than criminals since the incident, while lurid media reports insist that he was part of a broader terrorist network, without providing evidence.

Above all, no mention is made of the real issues facing working class youth—routine police harassment, mounting unemployment and poverty and a life lived in the shadow of endless war and escalating militarism—all of which have contributed to an epidemic of mental illness and a widespread sense of hopelessness and alienation.

Parramatta was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year as "Sydney's centre of youth unemployment" after figures showed an official young jobless rate approaching 17 percent. Lakemba, a diverse working class suburb in Sydney's southwest, is routinely denounced in xenophobic terms by the corporate press and right-wing "shock-jocks," because it is home to one of the country's largest Muslim communities.

Hamza, who spoke to the WSWs in Lakemba, is a 21 year-old apprentice in the construction industry.

He said, "I grew up in Flemington, in Melbourne, which has a lot of housing commission [public housing] and a big Somali community, and the police were a big problem. People were being harassed left, right and centre. In Sydney, you still get harassed just walking down the street. Police ask where you're going, completely unsolicited. They give you a hard time."

Commenting on the official response to the shooting, Hamza said, "I feel as though the media are being unnecessarily specific about where he was from and where he used to go. Usually when there's a Caucasian Australian who commits a crime, they just say he's a 'lone wolf.' They don't bring the community at large in to bear responsibility.

"I was still at school a couple of years ago, and it was hard when people brought up Islam because they don't hear anything except what they see on the news, so you get a bit of a hard time. That can radicalize the youth even more because you're an alien at school, and in the streets.

But I don't think there's any great crisis of 'radicalization.' There's a lot of Muslims, and most of us are just hard-working people."

Hamza described the social conditions facing youth in Australia, "I moved to Sydney just to get work, because I couldn't find stable employment in Melbourne. In Australia, there aren't many jobs for young people straight out of high school.

"Either you go to university and hopefully you get a job, which a lot of people can't afford, or you do factory work or get an apprenticeship. But they're scarce and factory work is starting to die down. Ford is closing in Broadmeadows [in Melbourne]. At the same time, they're trying to cut welfare for working class people."

Pointing to the relationship between the demonization of Muslim youth and refugees, and Australia's intimate involvement in US-led wars in the Middle East, Hamza commented, "It's easier to drop bombs on people that everybody thinks are evil. No one wants bombs to be dropped on people, so they dehumanize them."

Marcos, a 21-year-old construction worker who lives near Lakemba, said: "A lot of my Muslim mates are pretty upset because they feel like they're getting targeted. Some of them are too scared to go around in the streets, especially in Parramatta. The police give young Muslims a hard time. If there's a group of them at the beach, there will always be cops around.

"For young Muslims it will be tough to find work, and get job interviews. All young people are struggling. I've struggled a few times too. It took me a long time to get my current job. It's getting worse. They always say, 'there are a lot of opportunities in Australia,' but things are just fading away."

Joel, a 16-year-old high school student from Parramatta described the ongoing police harassment of youth in Parramatta:

"They are always threatening, saying things like, 'We'll bring you into an alley.' Another cop said to me, 'It's hard to pick up your teeth off the ground when your fingers are broken.' They have banned my friend from Parramatta forever. They said they would bash him if they saw him in the area again. It's 'undercovers' [plain-clothed police officers] that do that. I got banned from a shopping mall because of supposed gang related activities. I was just wearing a red bandana."

Joel said that when he was 15-years-old, he playfully started running when he saw police chasing somebody else. The police subsequently stopped pursuing their original target and instead surrounded him. "There were

12 or 15 cops, including riot police, all around me and they had me on my knees in handcuffs. I turned around and looked at the one behind me for a moment and he said, 'Are you threatening me?' He stomped on the middle of the handcuffs so my hands hit the ground. They ended up letting me go because I didn't do anything."

Joel said the killing of Jabar was, "not fair. In Australia and America, if you do anything to a cop, they will shoot you. Everyone knows that. Everyone knows that the scariest gang in the world is the police. They've got too much power."

Joel said he knew Farhad as an acquaintance, "He wasn't a happy child. He had depression. He was in a dark area. The cops didn't know that. They didn't ask him anything. And then they killed him. He didn't even have a second to say why he did it. Now that he's dead no one is going to be able to hear the rest of his story."

Ian, a construction worker who spoke to the WSWS in Parramatta said the death of Farhad was a "tragedy."

"He's a kid. They were saying he's a man at first ... I don't see him as an evil kid but misguided, he's made a serious mistake."

Ian denounced the police response, commenting, "They would have seen he was a child. They have so many resources in Parramatta. In 5 minutes they could have withdrawn and come back with bullet proof things and contained him. They shouldn't kill a kid, even if they have to hide from bullets. It's getting like the US, police pull their guns before asking questions. He was executed outright. It's a known fact, if you hurt a police officer, then they will kill you."

Ian said that he had seen widespread police harassment of Muslim youth: "I've lived in Auburn [another suburb in Sydney's west] and they pull young Muslim men over and rip their car apart all the time. They treat them like second-class citizens. They've categorized everyone from 15 years and older as a threat."



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