

Australian media whips up fear campaign against African youth

Richard Phillips
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The Australian media and political establishment has seized on clashes between police and immigrant youth in the Victorian state capital of Melbourne last Saturday night, during the annual “Moomba” festival, to whip up a frenzied fear campaign about “riots” by “gangs” and “hoodlums” in the city centre, laced with a heavy dose of racism.

None of the accounts should be accepted as good coin. The initial police reports claimed that there had been a riot in the city’s Federation Square between two rival gangs—Apex and Islander 23, comprising African and Pacific Islander youth respectively. Later it turned out, according to revised police accounts, that the Islander 23 group was not there at all.

The “riot” occurred when police waded into a group of African youth—allegedly members of the Apex gang—using pepper spray to break them up. According to police, some young people fled down Swanston Street and began engaging in “riotous behavior,” including throwing metal chairs and “confronting” bystanders.

The number of “rioters” and “gang members” ranges widely in media accounts. While there are claims that up to 200 were involved, only four people were arrested—two for being drunk and another for allegedly carrying a stun gun. The fourth was the only one detained for violent behavior (assaulting a police officer).

Police claim that an examination of CCTV footage will produce more arrests. On Tuesday, the media provided more lurid coverage of heavily-armed Special Operations Group police arresting two alleged Apex gang members. The arrests, however, had no connection whatsoever to the alleged incidents on Saturday night.

In a statement yesterday, the South Sudanese Community Association declared: “We do not accept police or media exaggeration of the Apex gang comprising of as many as 150 youth of Sudanese origin. This is not true. The preliminary investigation from our

end, at the community-leadership level, puts the offenders in this group at around six to 10 teenagers in the age group of around 14 and above. The rest of the youths were people who attended as spectators of the event, like many other people who attended the Moomba event on the night of March 12, 2016.”

Even more questions are raised by the initial police accounts of a brawl between rival gangs. On Sunday, the *Age* reported that Victoria Police had been tipped off by a Channel 7 reporter about a gang clash that had been organised on social media for Saturday night. Not only did senior police officers fail to take it seriously, but police numbers in Federation Square were unusually low. According to the *Age*, just six officers were present at one stage during the “violent rampage.”

Federation Square in central Melbourne, located opposite the city’s main rail station, is where many young people gather to meet on Saturday nights. With a scheduled Moomba fireworks display, the numbers would have been even higher. The obvious question is: were the police deliberately stood down in the expectation of a gang fight that could then be used as the pretext for a police crackdown and the ramping up of police numbers and powers?

Certainly the police media unit initially advanced the position that a major conflict between gangs had occurred. And police spokesmen have subsequently declared that the Saturday night rioting was “a line in the sand” moment and that resources would be re-prioritised to “tackle the problem.”

The state Labor government has backed the police to the hilt over the so-called “riot.” Premier Daniel Andrews held a press conference on Monday declaring that state authorities would be given the necessary resources to “smash” gang violence in Victoria. Those involved in the rioting had made an “evil choice,” he said, and “we will come after you.”

Under conditions where successive state governments, Labor and Liberal, have boosted police numbers, Andrews' comments amount to a declaration of war against working class youth. Immigrant youth, in particular, from oppressed suburbs such as Dandenong, where the Apex gang allegedly originated, are already subject to routine police harassment and worse.

Andrews went on to declare that he would ignore anyone raising the issues of poverty and social disadvantage. "Let's not have this as some sort of excuse," he said. "It does not matter who you are, your circumstances, your background. If you break the law you feel the full force of the law... I'm not interested, and neither are Victorians, in these 'poor me' stories."

These remarks reveal the contempt of the political establishment as a whole towards the working class, and particularly to young people. Suburbs like Dandenong have been savaged by decades of plant closures and job losses, and the gutting of essential social services, including youth workers, sports facilities and accessible entertainment, for which state governments are directly responsible. The official unemployment rate for adults in the area is 9.2 percent, and for 15-19 year olds, it was almost 26 percent in 2011.

Andrews' comments are an open admission that the only answer the Labor government has to the immense social problems confronting working class youth is to flood these areas with more police to "smash" anything regarded as anti-social behaviour.

To back up his threats, the premier has also given the cue for the media to whip up a racist witch-hunt of immigrant youth. A flood of stories has appeared since Saturday about the "wild Moomba riot," with hyperbolic claims that the city is now under siege from gangland "terror." The events during Melbourne's Moomba festival have been likened to gang activity in South Central Los Angeles. Editorial writers have gone into overdrive with demands for greater police powers and more equipment.

The *Age*—the pillar of what passes for the Melbourne liberal establishment—has joined the right-wing radio shock jocks and the hacks at Murdoch's *Herald-Sun* tabloid in complaining that police have been reluctant to stop young Africans on the street because they could be "subjected to racism complaints."

A disgusting editorial in yesterday's edition declared: "Victoria Police have swung too far in the direction of appeasement, especially after the force was sued over racial profiling in the Flemington and North Melbourne

areas... We also believe government authorities and some agencies have been over-indulgent towards some communities, without those same communities taking up the responsibility that rightly belongs with them."

One thing is certain: the Victorian police force is not guilty of "appeasing" immigrant youth. On the contrary, it is notorious for racism, directed in particular against young Africans. In 2013, six Afro-Australian men sued the police for racial profiling and received a \$3 million out of court settlement. In 2014, three police were sacked and other high-ranking officers, including an inspector, faced disciplinary proceedings over their production of blatantly racist items mocking African immigrants.

The *Age* editorial writer demanded that the government take a tough "law and order" stand: "Police must act swiftly to bring the offenders to court. Ultimately, for those on visas who are found guilty, the government must consider if the circumstances warrant deportation."

The federal government, supported by the Labor opposition, has already amended the country's immigration laws to allow the immigration minister to deport foreign-born residents who have "an association" with individuals or groups involved in criminal conduct and those deemed to be at risk of inciting "discord in the Australian community" (see: "Australian government deporting life-long residents over minor offences").

The vilification of immigrant youth over "gang activity" goes hand-in-hand with the "war on terror" and the scapegoating of Muslims. Its purpose is to stoke racial hostilities, to divide workers—young people in particular—and to justify police state measures that will be directed against all those workers and youth who begin to enter into political struggle against the rapidly deepening economic and social crisis that they confront.

The author also recommends:

Australia: Report details police attacks on African immigrant youth

[27 March 2010]

Australia: Police attack African youth at public housing estate

[15 December 2007]



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