

Australian youth and workers denounce media and government racist hysteria

Our reporters
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Australia's political establishment, the media and the police are maintaining their efforts to whip up a racist fear campaign, in particular against African youth, following exaggerated claims that youth "ran amok" in Melbourne's Federation Square on March 13.

The media and police continue to insist, without presenting any concrete evidence, that those involved were members of the Apex gang, a group supposedly established by South Sudanese youth from the south-eastern Melbourne suburb of Dandenong.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported last week, a group of African youth clashed with police after being attacked by officers using pepper spray during the annual Moomba festival. Scores of youth ran from the scene in attempt to escape the police. While four people were arrested that night, no one has yet been charged over the so-called rioting.

Late last week Australia's Immigration Minister Peter Dutton issued a statement in response to media calls for the deportation of immigrant youth found guilty of police charges and threats by Victorian Labor premier Daniel Andrews that his government would "smash" youth gangs. Dutton said that the Australian Border Force would work with Victoria Police to "cancel the visas of non-citizens involved in violent criminal activity such as that seen in Melbourne."

On Thursday, Victoria Police launched Operation Concord, a five-day operation in central Melbourne involving hundreds of uniformed and plain-clothed officers, in response to the previous weekend's riots. The *Herald-Sun*, which headlined its report "Police on high alert for Apex thugs," claimed the operation was to ensure that gang members did not "terrorise Melbourne city streets."

The centre of the "gang" activity is said to be Dandenong, a working-class suburb 35 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Once a thriving manufacturing hub, it is now the scene of closed factories, high youth unemployment and overcrowded public schools. Youth disengagement (young people neither in paid employment nor enrolled in

education) is endemic in Dandenong. In 2011, youth disengagement was over 15 percent, the second worst in Melbourne.

The ongoing government and media hysteria has prompted a reaction in working-class areas in Melbourne. WSWs reporters spoke with South Sudanese youth and workers in Dandenong and Footscray last week.

Peter, a science student from Victoria University, has lived in Australia for 10 years. "When there is a small incident involving the South Sudanese, it's always blown up in the media and exaggerated. Whenever we gather together, which is a Sudanese tradition, the police always say it's 'gang activity.'

"What do they expect when there are no jobs, or young people aren't at school? Are youth supposed to just hang around in the suburbs? This applies to all young people without jobs, not just the South Sudanese, but they always focus on us.

"When you live somewhere new you always want to fit in with the people you're living with but we're made to feel we don't belong here. Everything in the media is 'It's the Sudanese people's fault.' When you're at the [railway] station, the PSOs [Protective Services Officers] specifically come up to us because we're Sudanese."

James, a meat worker, commented on Labor Premier Andrews' statement that he was not interested in the social difficulties facing immigrant youth. "How can you ignore where people have come from. When people come from a war zone or are refugees and you don't help them, what do you expect," he said.

"If the police come up to you, even if you've not done anything wrong, you will try to get away because you don't want to get harassed or chased. Then the police go public saying 'it was the South Sudanese, they were being disruptive, or drinking or fighting..."

"I get stopped all the time by the police. They ask, 'what's your name, what are you doing here and did you have anything to drink today.' They do it, even if you're carrying your workbag and coming from the factory. If

you're asked that all the time, it's going to start making you feel upset or angry." James said that he had been victimised by police while simply sitting on a bench drinking a soft drink. The police accused him of drinking alcohol and threatened to arrest him.

"We want to be able to walk together and gather in our community. We want support from our community, especially if we can't get work or need someone to talk to... There's nowhere in this world now that's quiet and calm, almost everywhere it is war and refugees. We thought we came here for peace, but it's starting to look like we can't get that here either."

Abel, another Victoria University student, said: "The media is not telling the truth. You have to look at the problems first. The government has a hand in these things. Child protection officers are taking some of these young people from their families and then they have no direction. When they cause problems, they bring them back to the African community and then blame the community.

"Some youth have lost their parents, been traumatised by war, they've been brought up without a dad... Sending them back to Africa is not a solution. They need more help and it shouldn't be bad help like the child protection agencies.

"Our leaders have also failed to take the right direction. Instead of calling for punishment, they should demand the government help these young people. Some of our African community leaders are making accommodating conclusions."

Michael, a young worker, was near Federation Square at the time of the so-called riot. "I don't know exactly what happened but I saw police blocking the road, stopping the cars on the road. People were running around," he said.

"I looked everywhere and I couldn't tell who was doing what. There were a lot of youth from all sorts of backgrounds. I didn't see people doing hand-to-hand fighting but I saw people running away from the police. The media said it was 'gangs' but only mentioned African youth. These were just kids wanting to have fun in the city."

The main problem confronting youth was unemployment, Michael said. "We're waiting for jobs all the time but there are none. I've been working in construction but have been waiting round for work for the last two months. It was a struggle back home and it is a struggle here."

Emmanuel, a Latrobe University law student, denounced the sensationalised media coverage: "It has been a biased rant against the Sudanese, blaming them for this and every other thing. At the end of the day, the media is just picking on a minority. As soon as something happens, they try to immediately say, it was the Sudanese and people start to believe it..."

"I was there [in central Melbourne] at the Moomba festival

and I nearly got pepper sprayed. I was looking for my cousin and went up to a group of youth from my community. All of a sudden a police van pulled up and the youth started running. A police officer came up to me with the pepper spray but must have realised I wasn't part of the group and so he ran past me to chase after the other youth. If I'd started to run, they would have come after me and pepper sprayed me as well. The police were just looking for certain people—the South Sudanese—and were basically racially profiling.

"I've been stopped countless times not only by the police but by the PSOs at the train stations for no reason. The PSOs harassed me and my cousins once for about ten minutes. They were being very abusive, using abusive language, but I wasn't going to retaliate because they had a hidden agenda. They were looking for any reason to get me and would have said, 'He harassed a police officer, so we had to arrest him.'"

"[Labor premier] Andrews' statement—'We don't want any "poor me" stories'—is a bit outrageous. The government doesn't look at where these youth have come from or the struggles they have been through. If you come from a war-torn country it's obviously going to be much more difficult to adapt and it's very difficult to come from an English as a second-language background. If the government deports people for one offense it's outrageous."

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[31 August 2015]

Australia: Report details police attacks on African immigrant youth

[27 March 2010]

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[15 December 2007]



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