Systemic abuses in Australia's juvenile prisons: The class issues

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Millions of people in Australia and internationally have been sickened by the footage on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program last week showing boys as young as 10 being assaulted, stripped naked, tear-gassed, held in solitary confinement for days on end, and shackled and hooded in "restraint chairs" in juvenile detention centres in the Northern Territory (NT).

Apt comparisons have been made with the torture chambers run by the US government at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and the indefinite detention of refugees, including children, in the Australian government's incarceration camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

In order to cover over the basic class issues, concerted efforts are being made to divert the outrage over the NT abuses, mostly committed against indigenous boys, by claiming the violence is solely the product of racism. This theme, promoted throughout the mainstream media and by indigenous figures, is echoed by the various pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which attempt to give it a progressive face.

At protests around Australia last week, speakers from these groups sought to channel the deeply-felt disgust into divisive black nationalism, blaming "whites" for the brutality. The purpose of this campaign is to prevent the widespread revulsion from becoming a catalyst for a unified movement by workers and youth, indigenous and non-indigenous, against the root cause of this repression—the capitalist profit system itself.

Institutionally encouraged racism no doubt plays a role in the inhuman treatment of juvenile prisoners. Aboriginal children are 26 times more likely to be in detention than non-indigenous children. Indigenous people constitute about 3 percent of the Australian population, yet they make up about half the teenage detainees.

But to blame racism alone flies in the face of social reality. In the first place, the practices revealed in the NT are not isolated, nor are they confined to Aboriginal prisoners. For years, reports have documented bashings, isolations, "lockdowns" and deaths in jails and juvenile prisons across the country.

In Victoria, the state Labor government is currently confronting revelations that a teenager was placed in isolation for up to 10 days and another received a fractured limb after being "restrained" by staff. Likewise, the Queensland Labor government is attempting to cover up reports that vicious assaults by guards have continued since a 2012 investigation into six cases where teenage prisoners sustained serious injuries, including fractured wrists and arms.

In other words, the abuses in the NT reveal the increasingly brutal and lawless methods being used more broadly against the most impoverished and vulnerable layers of working-class youth.

The teenagers incarcerated around the country are invariably being punished for petty crimes, such as drug offences, car thefts and breaking and entering, that reflect worsening poverty, disadvantage and inequality. They come from poverty-stricken working-class suburbs, rural towns and remote settlements that are increasingly deprived of access to jobs and proper social services.

Since 2007, the NT has been used as a testing site to introduce devastating cuts to welfare and other social programs. The NT military-police intervention, begun by the Howard Liberal-National government in 2007, and continued by Labor, has involved strict controls on welfare payments ("welfare quarantining"), forcibly removing families from remote communities and

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cutting funds for health, welfare, employment and legal aid programs.

The NT may be one of the worst breeding grounds for immense social problems, such as substance abuse, family breakdowns and homelessness, but this is occurring in other states more widely and not just in indigenous communities. According to a recent report, young people in Australia, aged 15–24 years, are the first generation since World War II to face lower living standards than their parents. They confront high levels of unemployment and under-employment, insecure work, prohibitive housing costs and crippling tuition fees and debts. In some working-class areas, youth joblessness has reached depression levels of over 40 percent. In these areas too, youth face constant police harassment, intimidation and victimisation.

In direct response to the worsening social crisis, years of reactionary "law and order" campaigns by governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have driven incarceration rates soaring. Among adults, the imprisonment rate has doubled since 1984, with the number of prisoners roughly trebling to almost 38,000.

These same three decades have been marked by an enormous growth in social inequality. Today, the country's 200 richest individuals have collective personal wealth of almost $200 billion, while millions of working-class families face falling incomes, increasingly uncertain employment, soaring house prices and chronically-underfunded health and education services.

Amid this immense class divide, the political establishment has cultivated a narrow privileged stratum of Aboriginal bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, who profit directly from the worsening social misery of most indigenous people and the working class as a whole. Among this layer is NT Chief Minister Adam Giles, who is paid a base annual salary of $306,000, plus allowances—a far cry from the pittance of $13,717 allocated to a jobless worker.

Giles is also one of the most vehement exponents of the "law and order" regime. Even as he scrambled to cover his government's tracks, describing the "Four Corners" footage as "horrific," he declared: "The Northern Territory government does not resile from its tough approach to those who don't want to respect other people's property or safety."

Another personification of this social gulf is Mick Gooda, whom the NT and federal governments have now placed at the head of the royal commission entrusted with the task of ensuring that no one is held to account for the NT abuses. As the highly-paid ($332,000 plus $42,200 in allowances) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner for almost seven years, supposedly monitoring the human rights abuses perpetrated against indigenous people, he also bears responsibility for the abuses in the NT and elsewhere.

There are definite parallels with the intensive efforts of the media and political establishment in the United States to present the soaring numbers of police killings as solely a matter of race. There is a fear in ruling circles that mounting opposition to police and state violence can trigger a unified movement of the working class against the profit system and its repressive state apparatus.

The abuses in the NT are of a piece with the persecution and vilification of other vulnerable layers of workers and youth—refugees locked up indefinitely in offshore camps and the Muslim community increasingly subject to police state measures as the "war on terror." The bolstering of the state apparatus will increasingly be turned more broadly against the working class as social unrest and political disaffection grows.

The fight against state violence, and the defence of all democratic rights, can be taken forward only on the basis of a struggle to unify the working class of all races and ethnicities in a common struggle against the capitalist system. Workers and youth everywhere must come to the defence of the incarcerated youth, as well as the refugees and other victims of state repression, as part of the fight for a workers' government to reorganise society along socialist lines.

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