

Australia: Juvenile prison abuse exposed in Queensland

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Systematic efforts by the Labor government in the Australian state of Queensland to cover up abuses of boys in both juvenile and adult prisons have been laid bare by recent media reports. The assaults, imposition of solitary confinement and use of hooded restraints (“spit hoods”) have the same sickening character as the brutal practices uncovered in the Northern Territory in July.

The Queensland revelations point to the reality that the abuse of children as young as 10, mostly indigenous, in the Northern Territory (NT) is part of a wider pattern of violence directed against working class youth across the country, at the behest of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

Last month, after weeks of denials by the Queensland government, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) programs “Lateline” and “7:30” documented the mistreatment inside the Cleveland youth detention centre located at Townsville in northern Queensland.

A 17-year-old boy, Russell Johnston, came forward with details of how he was regularly assaulted by guards in the facility. Several staff members, former and current, corroborated Johnston’s claims.

CCTV images showed Johnston being held down by five guards. He was then handcuffed, ankle-cuffed, stripped naked and left in isolation for over an hour. This treatment was inflicted supposedly because he refused to have a shower. The isolation cells are small, concrete rooms with no furniture, water, air-conditioning or even a fan.

Johnston described how the staff would use verbal abuse and name calling, often of a racist nature, to provoke him, providing an excuse for a “code yellow,” which is called to subdue an allegedly unruly prisoner.

One former worker, Shayleen Solomon, said such abuse was a common occurrence. “In the detention

centre the things that you see—and it’s not only the physical abuse—the way that these big brutes of men will boast about how many young people they’ve smashed,” she said.

Youth Affairs Network of Queensland director Siyavash Doostkhah said what was reported by the ABC was “the tip of the iceberg and any attempt to limit investigations to what was aired is nothing less than an attempt to cover up much larger problems that have permeated all aspects of the youth justice system in Queensland for a long time.”

The material exposed the initial claims made by Queensland Attorney-General Yvette D’Ath, following the NT revelations that no such practices occurred in the state. She had told the media: “In Queensland all the allegations that have been put to the department over a number of years have been thoroughly investigated and referred to police or other investigative bodies where appropriate. Incidents have been detailed in reports, and recommendations have been made for reform and been put into action.”

In an attempt to cover its tracks, the state Labor government promised to convene an “independent” inquiry into the Cleveland centre. This inquiry, the personnel and details of which are yet to be announced, will attempt to whitewash the abuses and the political responsibility for them, just like the royal commission announced by the federal Liberal-National government into the NT juvenile detention system.

Soon after D’Ath announced the inquiry, evidence emerged of the vicious treatment of teenagers in the state’s adult prisons. Footage was obtained by the media showing a 17-year-old boy being placed by prison officers in what appeared to be a “spit hood,” similar to that used against the boys in the Northern Territory. This again exposed D’Ath’s claim to be

appalled by the NT images and her assertion that “spit hoods ... are not used in Queensland.”

Queensland is the only jurisdiction in Australia that treats 17-year-olds as adult prisoners, a measure that was introduced by the Labor government of Premier Wayne Goss in 1992. D’Ath promised that the government would end the practice, but claimed this could not happen until the government considered the “safety” of younger juvenile detainees if the 50 teenagers in adult prisons were transferred to the same facilities.

Successive state governments have ignored recommendations by the 1999 Forde inquiry into institutional abuse of children to end juvenile detention in adult prisons, as well as stop the prevalence of children being held in detention while waiting for their cases to be heard.

The Forde inquiry found that almost half of the children in detention were awaiting trial and recommended that alternative measures be explored to lower this number. However, the proportion has actually increased since then to an average of 80 percent. Moreover, after their cases are heard, only 15 percent of the children are handed sentences that result in detention.

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander youth make up 64 percent of Queensland’s juvenile detainees, despite accounting for just 8 percent of youth aged 10-17 in the state. This shameful situation reflects the fact that indigenous people represent one of the most vulnerable and impoverished layers of the working class.

High rates of youth unemployment in working class and rural areas across Queensland give some idea of the social devastation and loss of future prospects that confront young people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. Since 2012, the closures of mines and mine-related industries, like Townsville’s nickel smelter, have added to the jobs crisis.

Youth unemployment in Queensland officially stands at 13.2 percent, and is much higher in some northern and remote areas. In the northern tourist city of Cairns, youth unemployment is 22.1 percent. In the rural “outback,” the figure is 28.4 percent.

The resulting social distress can lead to broken families, substance abuse and petty crime. It also leads to increasingly vindictive and repressive responses by governments and their police apparatuses to crack

down on any expressions of discontent. What has been revealed in Queensland, as in the Northern Territory, is just a glimpse of the wider brutality that working class youth face at the hands of the police and prison authorities.



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