

Australian state government imprisons teenagers in adult jail

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The state Labor government in Victoria has seized on recent clashes at a juvenile detention facility in Melbourne to imprison children in a maximum-security adult prison. This repressive response to a so-called riot in the juvenile facility is the latest example of the brutality being inflicted on teenage prisoners, following revelations of sickening abuses in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

Up to 40 teenagers, accused of “rioting” on November 12 at the “Youth Justice Centre” in the suburb of Parkville, have been moved to the top-security Barwon Prison. The Parkville facility holds 15–18-year-old males who have been either sentenced to imprisonment or are awaiting trial, denied bail.

There have been repeated protests by teenage prisoners over the past two years, sparking clashes between detainees and staff at the overcrowded and dilapidated Parkville facility, and other Victorian juvenile jails. In the latest incident, according to unsubstantiated media reports, inmates set off fire alarms, barricaded themselves in inaccessible areas, and climbed onto rooftops.

Premier Daniel Andrews said he would make “no apology” for shifting boys to Barwon. He demonised the teenagers, declaring: “Violent, repeat offenders who have been involved in completely unacceptable conduct are going to adult prison.”

The detention of dozens of boys in an adult jail is supposedly a temporary measure, while “fortification works” are undertaken at the Parkville institution. The Andrews government, however, attempted to send seven alleged “ring leaders”—five 16-year-olds and two 17-year-olds—to the adult prison permanently.

The state’s Youth Parole Board blocked that permanent move as a violation of human rights legislation. Nevertheless, Families and Justice Minister

Jenny Mikakos said the government was determined to “send a very clear message that this disgraceful behaviour won’t be tolerated.”

Such statements indicate that the Labor government is preparing for further punitive measures against juvenile prisoners, a high proportion of whom have complex trauma, post-traumatic stress, and other psychological issues caused by unemployment, social dislocation, family breakdown, and alcohol and drug addiction.

More broadly, behind the tensions in the juvenile jails is the fact that working-class youth face deteriorating economic and social conditions. According to a recent report, young people in Australia are the first generation since World War II to face lower living standards than their parents.

Working-class youth confront high unemployment and under-employment, insecure part-time and casual work, heavy housing costs, huge debts and soaring tuition fees. Even on understated official figures, unemployment is around 28.7 percent for those 15–19 years old. In some areas, joblessness has reached depression-era levels of over 40 percent.

The only answer of the Labor government, and the ruling class as a whole, is police-state violence. Past pretences of tackling the underlying social problems, or even of providing treatment and rehabilitation programs for detainees, have been largely dispensed with.

The government’s vicious response was backed by the trade unions. Community and Public Sector Union state secretary Karen Batt said the provisional detention of young people in adult prisons was a “strong” and “smart” response.

The entire political and media establishment in Victoria has waged a sustained and reactionary “law

and order” campaign around the Parkville unrest. The commentary has tried to bury evidence of the appalling conditions inside the Parkville centre that likely sparked the supposed rioting.

In 2010, an Ombudsman’s report documented serious overcrowding, with the number of detainees in some wings of the facility being nearly twice the number of beds. Electrical hazards were also detailed, with at least two instances of staff members experiencing an electric shock. The report also exposed unhygienic facilities, unguarded potential suicide by hanging points, unsafe grounds and poor maintenance, among many other issues.

State Liberal Party opposition leader Matthew Guy declared that the government was not doing enough to curb a “violent crime wave” sweeping Victoria. In reality, Victorian Crime Statistics Agency data for the year ending June 30, 2016 showed a 4 percent decrease in the number of people aged under 25 convicted of committing a crime.

Lurid claims of a youth crime “tsunami” have been promoted by the media, especially the Murdoch outlets, such as the tabloid *Herald Sun*. The newspaper has spearheaded a racist campaign to link the unrest to immigrant and refugee youth, especially from Sudan. Without providing any evidence, it declared that leading “rioters” of Sudanese and other African backgrounds in the Parkville facility were connected with the so-called Apex gang.

A hysterical campaign against this alleged gang has been conducted since March, when a group of young people reportedly engaged in some petty thefts and vandalism in central Melbourne during an annual festival. It remains unclear whether the “Apex gang” actually exists.

The dispatch of teenagers to adult jails in Victoria is part of a wider pattern of violence directed against working-class youth across Australia, at the behest of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike. In both the Northern Territory and Queensland, governments have convened official inquiries to seek to whitewash, and quell public outcries over, exposure of abuses such as assaults, imposition of solitary confinement and use of hooded restraints (“spit hoods”) in juvenile jails.

The purpose of the “law and order” campaign is to create the climate for even more repressive laws, targeting the legal and democratic rights of young

people and the working class as a whole. The phenomenon is an international one, with governments moving toward authoritarian forms of rule in order to push through corporate austerity agendas.



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