

Australian state Labor government threatens violence against detained youth

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31 January 2017

The Labor Party government in the state of Victoria announced Friday that 40 adult prison guards will be deployed to two youth detention centres as part of a crackdown on alleged child rioters.

The guards will be armed with batons and capsicum spray. They will also be authorised to use tear gas against targeted youth detained in the justice system. Premier Daniel Andrews described the move as a “profound change” and “big step” to security arrangements at the Parkville and Malmsbury youth centres. In a menacing press conference, he declared the guards had the training and equipment “to return order” and they would “be charged with doing just that.”

The premier also announced the construction of a new high security youth detention centre, supposedly to isolate serious and violent offenders. Describing what will effectively serve as an adult-style prison for children, Andrews declared it “a significant investment ... it will be many hundreds of millions of dollars, but it is absolutely necessary.”

This follows the government’s announcement in December that \$2 billion will be allocated to expanding the police force by an unprecedented 20 percent.

The state Labor government’s measures are part of the Australian ruling elite’s wider assault on basic legal and democratic rights. Repressive measures are being especially directed against working class youth, as the political establishment anticipates stepped up social and political unrest.

Last year, the brutal treatment of youth detainees, many of Aboriginal descent, in the Northern Territory was exposed. Boys were assaulted and tear-gassed by detention guards, and hooded and shackled in methods recalling the infamous Abu Ghraib US military prison in Iraq. Now the conditions are being created for the

same treatment to be meted out to detained young people in Victoria.

The pretext for the government’s moves was provided by renewed clashes between young inmates and detention security guards. A so-called riot reportedly involved around 30 youth at the Malmsbury centre, 80 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, last Wednesday. Fifteen of the teenagers escaped after allegedly assaulting a staff member. They were all arrested within 24 hours, after allegedly stealing several cars, invading homes and committing four armed robberies.

At the same centre on January 12, six teenagers were accused of criminal damage after a clash with detention guards. Dozens of armed riot police and dogs were sent in at around 2pm in response to reports that inmates were “causing trouble.”

The “riot” was allegedly sparked when the six detainees refused to be moved to another area of the facility. They then tore out fence posts and locked themselves in the volleyball court, shouting at gathered journalists. The Human Services Department’s secure services director, Ian Lanyon, later reported that four of the teenagers (three aged 18 and one 19-year-old) were being sent to an adult jail.

The government effectively subverted an earlier state Supreme Court ruling that it was illegal to lock up children in adult prisons. After the ruling, the government simply rebranded the Grevillia Unit of the maximum security Barwon Prison, west of Melbourne, as a “youth justice facility and remand centre.”

Legal representatives for one of the teenagers sent to the Barwon prison after the January 12 clashes, 18-year-old Grayson Toilolo, said Toilolo was feeling “very anxious” about the transfer.

The *Age* reported the comments of an unnamed

grandfather of one of the boys who escaped from the Malmsbury centre last week. He said his 17-year-old grandson was a “good kid” who got in trouble with police after being deeply traumatised by the death of his mother. He urged the government to provide the boy with the help he required. “The government is now trying to convince everyone that the only way to fix this mess is to build more jails and lock everyone up,” he said. “But it’s not working and we’re in a terrible mess.”

Several reports detailing oppressive conditions within the juvenile detention system have been buried. In 2010, a state Ombudsman’s report noted numerous problems and risks facing inmates and staff at the facility, including overcrowding, hygiene issues, unsafe grounds and electrical hazards. A WorkSafe review completed last September identified mounting and unaddressed mental health and drug addiction and withdrawal issues among the young inmates.

The media is attempting to manufacture a climate of “law and order” hysteria over the crisis within the juvenile justice system. Its aim is to overturn any notion of rehabilitation or that crime is the product of a diseased society and prepare the justifications for violence against young people targeted by the police and courts.

The Murdoch tabloid, the *Herald Sun*, is leading the campaign. A comment published on Sunday by journalist Katie Bice, “Take off kid gloves, rule with iron fist,” was typical of the filthy and provocative material being published every day. Bice demanded that the government “be strong” and “rule with an iron fist.” She denounced “pen-pushing advocates [of youth detainees] who believe a diamond lies in the rough—sometimes it’s just a dirty old piece of coal.”

The same edition of the newspaper carried an editorial, “Less Carrot, More Stick.” It denounced “soft policies, soft sentencing” and declared the root cause of the problem to be “a scary lack of respect for authority.” It effectively proposed to torture detained youth, demanding that they be given “a reality check in the form of tough measures to punish all those who cause trouble, including solitary confinement, as well as the withdrawal of visiting rights and all other privileges.”

The working class needs to take the campaign against detained children as a warning. The state repression

now being directed against layers of some of the most oppressed young people will be used far more broadly, as the ultra-wealthy and their political representatives seek to suppress any challenge to their rule.



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