

Australian state Labor government steps up punitive measures against youth

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The state Labor government in Victoria, backed by the corporate media and the Liberal-National opposition, is conducting a repressive campaign against children and youth who are charged with crimes.

Premier Daniel Andrews's government pushed the Youth Justice Reform Bill through both houses of state parliament with bipartisan support. The legislation requires that youth aged 18 to 21, and teenagers over the age of 16 charged with serious offences, be tried and sentenced as adults.

Previously, 18- to 21-year-olds could serve their sentences in youth detention centres, while 16- to 18-year-olds were tried and sentenced in a children's court.

The maximum sentence for children aged 10 to 14 will be lifted from two to three years. Sentences for detainees caught escaping will be added cumulatively to their previous detention terms, and the police and media can publicly "name and shame" them.

Officers are also being granted legal immunity if they assault detainees. The legislation specifies that an "officer is not personally liable for injury or damage caused by the use of force" against detainees if this is deemed "reasonable and necessary" to prevent damage to property or ensure the "security of the centre or police jail."

The Labor government tabled the legislation after the Victorian Supreme Court ordered it to remove 16 teenagers from the adult maximum-security Barwon Prison.

Up to 40 teenagers were transferred to Barwon last November for allegedly taking part in a "riot" to protest against the oppressive conditions at Melbourne's Parkville Youth Justice Centre.

The government defied a previous Supreme Court ruling to remove the youth from Barwon. Underscoring

its contempt for basic legal and democratic norms, it simply rebranded a wing of the Barwon jail as a youth detention centre. It then authorised prison guards to use capsicum spray and batons against the teenagers.

In the latest court judgment, Justice John Dixon noted that children "were effectively under continuous isolation or restraint for multiple days at a time." They were often held in lockdown for 23 hours a day, and handcuffed while being moved around the facility. Leaked footage from inside the unit showed the teenagers being capsicum-sprayed.

Brendan Murray, a former executive principal of Parkville College, a network of schools inside youth detention centres, condemned the transfer of the detainees to the maximum-security jail as a form of torture. Murray added that he suspected the youth were moved to the adult facility "for political reasons."

The government responded by suspending Murray. He then resigned from his position in order to be able to speak out publicly.

Murray told Fairfax Media on April 17 that prison staff mocked him when he attempted to speak to teenage inmates at Barwon about their educational needs. A doctor also informed Murray that he was being prevented from distributing medication to the youth.

When Murray told the prison staff they could not keep the children in isolation for 23 hours a day, he was told: "We're doing this to let them know who's boss."

Murray reported that the children "complained of being threatened with spray." An officer allegedly warned one of the teenagers that he would put their "face in concrete" if they misbehaved.

The conditions described by Murray exist throughout the state. A recent Commission for Children and Young People inquiry into the Victorian youth detention

system reported that “some children and young people were isolated for weeks at a time.”

In some cases, young people were forced to urinate and defecate on the floor of their isolation cells. Four young people were “isolated” over 100 times.

Imprisonment in isolation is a form of torture, which can cause serious psychological damage to both adults and children.

The youth detained mostly come from the poorest and most oppressed layers of the working class. Many suffered trauma and abuse as young children. Across Victoria, 45 percent of youth in detention were previously in child protection, and 63 percent were victims of abuse or neglect.

Approximately 80 percent of the teenagers languishing behind bars—including all the teenagers sent to Barwon—have not been convicted of a crime but were on remand, mostly denied bail.

These revelations demonstrate that the abuses inflicted on youth detainees in the Northern Territory, many of Aboriginal descent, that were exposed last year are just an extreme example of what is happening nationally. Boys were assaulted, tear-gassed by detention guards, placed in Guantanamo Bay-style “spit hoods” and shackled in restraining chairs for hours (see: “Australia—testimony details abuse in youth detention centres”).

The attacks on the rights of young people are part of a broader “law and order” campaign being prosecuted by the Victorian Labor government. Last December it announced it would spend \$2 billion to boost the police force by 20 percent, or 3,100 officers, over the next four years. It has also moved to deny parole to prisoners convicted of “serious crimes” and to curtail the right to bail.

These measures are aimed at boosting the repressive powers of the police and the state to deal with the unrest generated, particularly among youth, by a deepening social crisis produced by decades of job destruction in basic industries and round after round of budget cuts.

The campaign scapegoats the most oppressed sections of the working class. The Labor government and the Liberal-Nationals have repeatedly joined the tabloid press to demonise immigrant youth accusing them of belonging to violent “gangs.” The same political establishment is responsible for slashing funding for

health, education and other programs and thus for the social conditions that fuel anti-social activities.



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