

Australian workers, youth speak out against witch-hunt over “African gangs”

Our reporters
13 January 2018

The Australian political and media establishment is continuing to fuel a racist scare campaign, directed at young people of African origin in Melbourne, the southern state of Victoria’s capital city.

A daily barrage of lurid newspaper headlines and hysterical television news reports over so-called “African gangs” has created a toxic atmosphere, triggering growing fears that the most backward layers of society are being incited to commit acts of violence against black youth.

South Sudanese-Australian lawyer Nyadol Nyuon raised the racially motivated murder of Liep Gony in Melbourne in October 2007. “Without wanting to alarm people, what is concerning, and [in] light of the personal attacks directed at me personally and what I am reading online, is that the ‘air’ is beginning to feel like pre-Liep,” she wrote on Twitter.

Media provocations are mounting. It has emerged that a *Daily Mail* “exclusive report” of a “gang flare up” in the outer west suburb of Tarneit was triggered by a *Mail* photographer, who provoked a group of innocent teenagers socialising at a shopping centre, by taking close up pictures of them without permission.

A police statement explained: “The teenagers had been doing nothing of public interest prior to the photographer’s decision to move in and take the photos and [the group] reacted to the photographer and what he was doing. This led to police being called in and a scuffle ensued ... After the event, the photographer acknowledged that his actions had provoked the incident and apologised.”

Police sent an email to media outlets: “Victoria Police does not want to see further incidents such as [in Tarneit] and I am therefore respectfully asking that you remind your media teams about the importance of not inflaming situations or inciting conflict, and acting responsibly at all times.”

The “African gangs” furore is being driven by the need, on the part of Australia’s ruling elites, for a divisive diversion, promoting racist and xenophobic “law and order” measures, on the one hand, while pushing an agenda of militarism abroad and attacks on the working class at home, on the other. (See “Australian government promotes racist diversion over so-called ‘African gangs’”)

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with several workers and young people of African origin in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

Abdi, lives in Tarneit and works in disability services.

He said, “The African youth don’t have the problem—it’s the community and police, constantly harassing them, constantly on their backs,” he explained. “These young people are being violated—it’s then that they start more drama. They’re going to retaliate. I avoid the police now, but in the past I used to get searched every five minutes.

‘Random check’ as they call it, but in reality I have videos on my phone that show otherwise. They just make random excuses to talk to you, to profile you. There’s no such thing as the Apex gang or ‘African gangs.’ People are vulnerable—we don’t have a say in anything in this community. We can’t really speak up for ourselves.”

Asked why he thought the media was promoting the racist campaign against black youth, Abdi replied: “There are other problems in the world that they don’t want us to see—it’s a distraction. They’re trying to make us focus on one thing and forget about other things. The government is corrupt, this is business, you know what I mean? Everything is business in this world. So these guys have found the weak link, to target young Africans, calling them gang members. Bikies are gang members, but they’re not talking about bikies every day.

“Instead they attack young people, young vulnerable guys who are school students—they are under 18 years of age. Instead of making a nice place for them to play around, like a recreational centre or a community spot, where the boys can just chill and play computer games or something like that. But no—they don’t do that, what the police do is get up at their throats while they play basketball at the local court in Tarneit. Up at their throats, driving around, looking to intimidate kids. Obviously, what happens then? The police are provoking us. They need to stand down, I reckon.

“These kids don’t have the opportunities right now to go out there and get a job. As soon as they leave their house to look for a job they’re getting harassed. When they look for a job, they go out there and hear, ‘Hey listen mate, you’re part of Apex.’ As soon as they see a young African, they say ‘oh you’re part of a gang.’ There’s no opportunities, opportunities just aren’t there.”

Ubah, is a female office worker with children. Originally from Somalia, she has lived in Tarneit for the past three years.

“It’s not my experience here, seeing gangs around the streets,” she told the WSWs. “I walk around at night, I can go to a restaurant, nobody is going to touch me or rob me. I live in Tarneit, where this is supposedly happening every night. I live across from a McDonald’s where there are lots of young people, but nothing has ever happened that I’ve seen. I have my car outside and my kids’ bikes, and nobody has ever robbed me—I really think this whole thing is rubbish.”

She continued: “I think they’re doing this because it’s easy to blame minorities. It’s easy to blame us Africans, because we’re the weakest link. We can’t fight back, so it’s easy for them to target us. They want to divide people, create hatred. To turn people against each other, instead of uniting together against the government. I think it’s just horrible. I was just thinking about Trump when I said that. They see this as a good way to ensure that we’re busy focusing on each

other and not on what they're doing.

"I saw [immigration minister] Peter Dutton on TV, I thought what he said [alleging the people in Melbourne are afraid to eat at restaurants because of African gangs] was absolutely rubbish and outrageous. He is purposely creating hate, he wants us to turn against each other. I think it's a political game for them.

"There is an election coming up, so he's just thinking about himself and his party's interests. I don't fear African gangs at all, I fear more about the hate that they've created. Now I don't take my kids out to the park because of the hate that they've created. I've noticed this more when I'm walking down the street. You hear more people yelling out from cars, 'you black African, go back to your own country.' This is because of what they've created. What they've done is add fuel to the fire."

Ubah called for a united response to these attacks: "We all have to unite together against this. When I first came here, it was peaceful. There was a bit of racism, but not like now. Since Trump took over, things changed. I see things on Facebook, 'African people go back to your country.' That it's full of Arabs and Muslims. What does it matter who's African, Asian or Arab? We're human beings. All these divisions come from the government and the media. They don't talk about Syria at all, little children being bombed every day."

Garang is a 17-year-old high school student who also lives in Tarneit. Now planning on becoming an electrician, he was born in Australia, with his family coming to the country in 1999.

"What's happening is really dividing, separating different groups of people just based on their race," he said. "It's not all of us involved in stuff, but people are assuming that we are, even if we're not. The police just give you weird looks—even other people in the community do the same, like wondering are you a gang member or a criminal? They make assumptions about who we are or what we're capable of—even when we're not criminals or anything. It's just not right."

Menyang, is a warehouse worker who came to Australia as a refugee 13 years ago.

He told the WSWs, "I went through a tough time as a teenager, but now I'm 30 years old. I can drink alcohol now and know my limits, but those kids, they don't know what to do. You know, when you're a kid and you've been drinking, someone can say to you, 'let's go do this,' and you'll do it as a joke. They're not conscious. They'll just go and do it, for fun. They are not a gang. "Apex gang?" What is it? I can say that I am from Footscray, does that make me a Footscray gang? No, I don't think so. I am just from here.

"Peter Dutton now says, 'we'll deport them.' Those are kids! You cannot deport them; they were born here! How are you going to deport them? Take them where? They know South Sudan as a name, but they've never been there, or maybe they were there when they were a very young kid. For me, I was in Sudan when I was 8, I know how it is. If you take them to South Sudan, you are taking them to a war zone again. What are they going to do there? Imagine if you deported people to Syria. What are they going to do? They will join ISIS, because they will think, 'OK, white people kicked me out of their country, what am I going to do? Turn on them. Simple!'"

John said: "We think that our children shouldn't be called a gang. They don't have any organised body funding them as a gang. Police and government agencies interview them and find that a big organisation isn't there. Then they say: 'Because they're African, they should be deported.' It is fuelling this issue, they need it to be politicised. If the government was for all the people, they would have a bottom up approach and come to the community."

Ahmet, an economics student at RMIT university, explained, "You can hardly stand around anymore with a couple of your friends, because people get suspicious of you. There's nothing to do here. The only thing you can do is just play sports. They shouldn't demonise all of us, using harsh titles like gangs. It's pretty much because these young people have no money, they're refugees as well. I've lived here my whole life, but in the recent years there has been more racism, especially since Pauline Hanson. Racism is definitely increasing, especially since Donald Trump came out. They're trying to divide people up. I worry at night when I'm driving around, to be careful of my speed and that I'm following road rules, because I know I will get stopped by the police. They see me in a silver car and I know I'm going to get stopped."

Joseph works at a childcare centre. "When people don't have anything to do, they have to think of doing something. So if people don't have jobs or don't go to school, then they will go to the streets, and you know what happens in the streets. They need jobs, they need people from their own country to help them. They know their background. So what do we do? Do we deport them? Deportation is not the solution. Some people when they are deported will die, it is such a shock to them."

Abdi is a 22-year-old factory worker. He spoke with the WSWs together with his friend **Hakim**.

"I think the biggest problem within the African community is the African leaders themselves, to be honest," Abdi said. "The funny thing is that there are many African leaders that say they represent us as youth. But they haven't done anything. They're getting funding from the government all the time; we don't know for what. We don't know what they're doing, but then they go and meet with the Australian government and say they're representing us. A couple of days ago, there was some sort of meeting with the African community leaders. They met with some Liberal Party representatives and journalists, but there were no youth there. It was all about youth, but there were no youth there. The easiest way to come to a conclusion about what youth want is to ask them, 'What do you guys want, what do you think?'"

Hakim said: "The police actually criminalise a lot of Africans, every day they just pick on them. All they need is a bit of community service, a bit of help, but when someone treats you like a criminal, before you are a criminal, then you get used to it, because no one is on your side. They get treated like a criminal, and so the kids just say 'stuff it, I may as well act like one.' I've been harassed by the police. They just come up to you for no reason, they ask you what's your name, this and that, what are you doing here? And I tell them, I live here, what do you mean?"

"When Australian guys are doing the exact same thing [committing crime] they're not on the news the same way Africans are. One person does something, and it's on the news for three to four weeks. The way the media words it as well, calling them thugs."

Abdi added: "They put all of the Africans into one group, but there are 54 different African countries. It's to stereotype everyone. I think that's a big problem."



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