

Australia: Riot police tear-gas youth at Don Dale juvenile prison

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Riot police stormed the Northern Territory's Don Dale youth prison on November 6, after two of the imprisoned children allegedly took a key from a guard and unlocked the cells of other inmates.

Some of the youth allegedly set fire to the centre's school building and attempted to escape by cutting through the prison fences with angle grinders. After an eight-hour standoff, police fired tear gas before forcibly removing the children to the watch house of Darwin police station.

Parents of the Don Dale detainees, who heard about the incident on social media, watched in fear as the "Territory Response Group"—part of the national counter-terrorism taskforce—stormed the burning prison.

One parent posted to social media: "They want to surrender but they're scared because there's people running around with guns, pointing them at them." Another relative stated: "We've made this institutionalised decision to jail kids. That ain't right. It's wrong."

Even Northern Territory (NT) government representatives have been forced to acknowledge the appalling conditions at the facility. Brent Warren, the NT government's general manager for youth justice, described Don Dale as a "retired and broken adult prison."

The government, however, has made clear that it will press ahead with a law-and-order agenda that includes persecuting the most vulnerable youths and forcing them into dangerous prisons for minor offences.

In 2014, inmates in the original Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre were transferred to Berrimah Prison, a maximum-security facility previously used to house adult inmates.

They were later returned to the asbestos-

riddled "new" Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre after minor renovations.

A report on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program in 2016 exposed the inhumane and illegal treatment of children held at the Don Dale facility. Children, as young as 12, were frequently assaulted over a number of years by guards trained in mixed martial arts.

The program documented a 2014 incident, in which heavily armed riot police stormed the facility after minor unrest, indiscriminately using capsicum spray against prone children. It documented one inmate, then 17-year-old Dylan Voller, being immobilised for hours on end in a hooded restraint chair, akin to those used in the US military's torture programs at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantánamo Bay.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government announced a royal commission in a bid to defuse international outrage over the incident. The royal commission called for Don Dale to be closed, finding that youth detention centres in the NT "were not fit for accommodating, let alone rehabilitating, children and young people."

Like every other royal commission, it was a whitewash, which held nobody to account for the institutional abuse of young people, and did nothing to alter the conditions of those who remained imprisoned. The state Labor government, in office since 2016, has ensured that the inhumane facility remains open.

For decades, Labor and Country-Liberal-led NT governments have pursued punitive "law and order" policies aimed at criminalising the poor. With roughly twice the per-capita staffing level of any other Australian state, NT police are notorious for harassing and demeaning treatment of ordinary people, especially of an indigenous background.

Armed with “paperless arrest” powers, which allow them to take people into custody without making any written record, Territory police routinely detain citizens on suspicion of minor offences.

On an average day in the Northern Territory, there are around 1,750 people in full-time prison custody. This represents almost 1 percent of the population, more than four times the national average. The situation is much worse for indigenous people, with 2.4 percent of the NT’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents incarcerated. Overall, indigenous people make up 85 percent of the NT adult prison population. In June of this year, every youth in detention in the NT was Aboriginal.

These draconian measures have created record levels of overcrowding in NT correctional facilities. With prisons overflowing and grossly under-resourced, rehabilitation programs aimed at addressing anger management, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol addiction, as well as education and work experience programs, have been cut.

Nothing has been done to address the profound social problems facing indigenous people in the Northern Territory. More than a quarter of Aboriginal people are unemployed, and the figure is higher for young people and those living in rural areas. Federal and state governments have responded to the social crisis, with welfare quarantining, police and military deployments and degrading “work for the dole” programs.

As one relative of the Don Dale inmates told reporters at the perimeter fence, “Most of these kids here that are causing trouble now are from communities. Guess what? We’re born poor, we die poor. These kids are institutionalised from birth ... We need industry out there, we need jobs and opportunities for these young kids. We don’t need to be locking them away here. We should be building TAFE centres and things like that so kids can get educated. And what are we doing? Nothing. Because the CLP [Country Liberal Party], the ALP [Australian Labor Party], and every other political party are just the same.”

Anti-democratic attacks on vulnerable working class youths are not confined to the Northern Territory.

After Victoria’s Parkville Youth Justice Centre was damaged by inmates during unrest in 2016, some of the teenage detainees were moved to Barwon Prison, a maximum-security adult jail. There they were capsicum-

sprayed and faced extended periods of solitary confinement. Due to the lack of adequate educational facilities, the youth were unable to continue working towards their high school or TAFE certificates.

The Victorian Labor government, which carried out this illegal transfer of children to an adult prison, later announced in 2017 that it was constructing the “the highest-security youth justice facility that Victoria has ever seen.” This would have six-metre perimeter fencing and many of the same design features as a maximum-security adult prison.

The increasingly repressive measures directed against youth by governments across the country are part of a broader police-state build-up, supported by the entire political establishment. This is aimed at preparing for the violent repression of the social and political struggles that will inevitably emerge as a result of the social crisis created by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.



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