

Police shut down “drill rap” group’s Australian tour

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Onefour, a popular drill rap group from working-class western Sydney, had its Australian tour cancelled last month as a result of a campaign of suppression by police. This is an extraordinary act of censorship directed against a group with a wide following among young people.

Onefour, whose music references life in some of Australia’s most impoverished neighbourhoods, has amassed a significant following online, with 27 million views on its YouTube channel, and more than 28 million plays on Spotify. When its latest single *In The Beginning* was released last month, the group was one of only four Australian artists in the ARIA Top 50 chart of the country’s highest selling singles and albums.

Victorian and New South Wales (NSW) police admitted to meeting with venues in Melbourne and Sydney in advance of the planned tour, while police in Perth and Adelaide refused to comment. NSW police also confirmed that they contacted streaming services, asking them to remove Onefour’s music.

Onefour was not prevented from performing a sold-out show in Auckland, although NSW police did contact their counterparts in New Zealand, possibly contributing to one member of the group, J Emz, being denied entry to the country. Police also raided band member Spenny’s home the day before the New Zealand show.

Upon the band’s return from New Zealand, the band’s manager was served with an order prohibiting him from interacting with the band members. Band members YP and Lekks cover their faces in their music videos and live performances because they are also the subjects of police non-association orders.

Police used various powers to block the Australian concerts. Victorian police threatened the Melbourne venue with suspension of its liquor licence. In NSW, Sergeant Nathan Trueman told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Background Briefing” that police informed venues: “You need X number of police, and the cost of the tickets are never gonna cover the number of police.”

Trueman concluded the interview with a blunt threat

directed at the members of Onefour: “I’m gonna use everything in my power to make your life miserable until you stop doing what you’re doing. Every aspect of your life, I’m gonna make it uncomfortable for you.”

Trueman claimed that the concerts were shut down to stop violence, but no incidents of violence were reported at the Auckland show, nor at Onefour’s previous performances in Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne.

Trueman is a member of Strike Force Raptor, which is working with Strike Force Imbara, formed to target a supposed wave of gang violence in western Sydney. Official NSW crime statistics do not indicate any such trend.

Police claim that Onefour is affiliated with the “Greater West Brotherhood” gang, and have attempted to link them to the murder of a rival “Inner West” gang member in 2018, based on Onefour’s song lyrics.

While the lyrics reflect the “postcode war” rivalry between these groups, and a disturbing and morbid endorsement of the killing, they contain no information that was not already in the public sphere. The police are relying on these lyrics to make their case because they have no concrete evidence linking the rappers to the crime.

Two members of Onefour, YP and Lekks, along with former member Celly, were recently jailed over a 2018 pub brawl, but there is no suggestion that it was gang-related.

Onefour come from Sydney’s Mount Druiitt, a sprawling outer suburb largely consisting of public housing, where the official unemployment rate is 11.6 percent, and almost 25 percent of 15–24 year olds are not working or studying.

While 4.46 percent of the NSW population lives in the area surrounding Mount Druiitt, they make up 5.7 percent of the state’s prisoners. For many, especially indigenous and immigrant youth, the police harassment and incarceration begin in childhood.

J Emz commented: “Us guys, we did grow up in and out of the system, so we have a history with the boys in blue, but with that being said, at the moment with our lives, and with the music and that, it’s keeping us off the street.”

Despite these obstacles, the four young Pacific Islander

men are working hard to build a musical career. As well as their Australian success, they have won a substantial following overseas.

While there is no explicit political content in Onefour's music, broad recognition among young people of the global nature of the social crisis facing them is, in itself, a threat to the efforts of the ruling classes to divide the working class along national and racial lines.

Drill rap has its roots in the working-class neighbourhoods of Chicago, a city where decades of job cuts and attacks on welfare have led to profound social inequality and the tenth-highest homicide rate in the United States. These murders overwhelmingly take place in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and the victims are mostly under the age of 30.

It is no coincidence that young people growing up in British council estates and working-class suburbs in Australia identify with the music. While the relative unavailability of handguns in these areas helps to limit the homicide rate to a fraction of Chicago's, many of the same underlying social conditions exist.

In part, the violence described by drill lyrics is based on this reality, but it is also a stylistic—and highly exaggerated—element of the genre. Speaking on the *Halfcast* podcast, Onefour's YP explained: "The genre is based on violence, it's a violent genre. We do rap about violence, because that's what the genre's based on."

While the lyrical content of drill rap has attracted official criticism, little has been said about the prevalence of violence throughout corporate-driven "mainstream" culture. Most Hollywood heroes and video game characters are police, soldiers or criminals. Rugby league and union, as well as boxing and other fighting sports—heavily promoted and often the only form of entertainment available in the outer suburbs—glorify violence and tribal loyalty.

Most significant is the violence of governments and the police and military apparatus. Australia has been continuously at war in the Middle East for almost as long as the Onefour rappers have been alive. Police numbers have swelled, along with their use of Tasers, pepper spray and guns, often against the most disadvantaged layers of the population.

While it is rare to find examples of biting political criticism in the lyrics of drill rappers—certainly Onefour has not yet provided any—there are exceptions. British drill and grime artists responded powerfully to London's Grenfell Tower fire disaster in 2017.

The police suppression of Onefour follows a similar campaign against drill artists in the UK. At the request of London Metropolitan Police, Google removed dozens of music videos from YouTube, on the phony basis that the

songs encouraged violent behaviour. Artists have been slapped with geographical restrictions, and handed suspended sentences for performing their own songs.

Trueman made clear that NSW police are following the British lead: "You look at London, they're implementing Serious Crime Prevention orders, that's something that we have here, we have in our back pocket, we could potentially use."

In Australia, as in the UK and elsewhere, draconian laws passed under the guise of combating terrorism and organised crime are being used as broad tools of suppression, targeting protesters and artists. The use of these laws to shut down Onefour based on the content of their music sets a dangerous precedent that threatens basic democratic rights.

Amid growing discontent over climate change, refugee rights, war and social inequality, similar measures will be employed against political organisations, journalists and others who oppose, or even question, the status quo under capitalism.

The author also recommends:

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