

Australian police officers assault Aboriginal boy in Sydney

Oscar Grenfell
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Footage of Sydney police officers assaulting a 16-year-old Aboriginal boy on Monday has been viewed hundreds of thousands of times on social media, provoking widespread anger and prompting comparisons with the brutal actions of the US police over the past week.

The unprovoked attack took place just hours after Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared on national radio that explosive US demonstrations against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis had little relevance to conditions in Australia. Morrison stated there was “no need to import” the mass protests against police violence unfolding across America.

The video of Monday’s assault gives the lie to those self-serving assertions. Australian police, like their US counterparts, are trained to brutalise working class youth as part of their role in enforcing unprecedented social inequality and stamping down on mounting discontent.

As with the murder of Floyd, the only thing that was exceptional about the police attack in Sydney was that it was captured on film, providing graphic evidence of the harassment and arbitrary state violence that oppressed and working-class youth are threatened with on a daily basis.

The footage was taken after a group of youths were stopped by four police officers in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills. Reports indicate that the boys were being questioned only because they were spending time together in a public park, a common occurrence for Aboriginal youth.

When the video began, one of the boys was sitting on the ground, seemingly detained by the police. His friends objected to their treatment, with one apparently referencing the situation in the US. Sharp words were exchanged.

A male officer then marched over to another of the youths and placed his hands behind his back, as if to make an arrest. The youth did not resist. Without warning, the officer kicked the boy's feet out from under him. The 16-year-old was slammed onto the concrete, without any way of bracing the impact.

He was then held to the ground, with one officer pinning his legs down with her knee. The boy screamed out in obvious distress and pain, but the officers were completely indifferent.

The youth was taken to hospital with a bruised shoulder, extensive grazing and chipped teeth. Given the manner in which he was thrown onto concrete, the injuries could have been far worse, even fatal. Underscoring the fact that he had committed no crime, the 16-year-old was released from police custody without being charged.

Speaking on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio this morning, the teenager’s sister said: “When he came back home later that night, he was shaken up. He was very sore this morning and he was distraught. Teenagers, they’re lippy, but you don’t just abuse children because they’re lippy.”

His family addressed a press conference today, extending solidarity to the relatives of George Floyd and all victims of police violence. They have obtained legal representation and demanded that the officer who threw the boy to the ground be charged. The family is considering launching a private prosecution if no action is taken.

The response of the authorities has been a combination of damage control, obfuscation and defense of the violent assault.

Shortly after the footage began widely circulating online, it was announced that police professional standards command was investigating the incident.

Such in-house operations, with the police essentially “investigating” themselves, are routinely used to white-wash misconduct. The officer has not even been stood down, let alone charged, but instead was placed on unspecified “restricted duties.”

New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian, and her Labor Party counterparts, have shed crocodile tears, clearly fearful of the anger that the attack has provoked. Berejiklian said it showed that “we still have a long way to go in our country,” and that “what happened in the US is a good wake up call.”

NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller publicly apologised to the boy. In the same breath, however, he declared that the “leg sweep technique” shown in the video was sometimes used during arrests. The officer did not have a “checkered history,” prompting Fuller to obscenely suggest that he had merely been “having a bad day.”

The callous attitude of the political establishment was summed up by NSW Police Minister David Elliot who stated that he was “horrified” by the language used by the group of youths. Elliot said he was “just as disturbed” by what the children had said, as he was by the fact that one of them was then violently attacked.

The police investigation, the weasel words from Berejiklian and the hand-wringing from Labor are all aimed at diffusing hostility provoked by the footage. For all of Morrison’s claims that the situation in Australia is fundamentally different to the US, the authorities are clearly fearful that similar explosive struggles could emerge in this country.

This was summed up in comments to the media by NSW Police Central Metropolitan Region Commander Mick Willing. Asked about the footage and the demonstrations in the US, he said he was “concerned” about the police assault, but added that he was “equally concerned about others who may use this footage to inflame it and turn it into something that it’s not.”

Yesterday evening, a lively protest of more than a thousand people took place in the centre of Sydney. The previous night over 2,000 rallied in Perth, in one of the largest demonstrations in the Western Australian capital in several years.

Tens of thousands have indicated on social media that they may participate in further protests in Melbourne, Sydney and other capital cities this weekend.

The international protests are intersecting with

longstanding public anger over police violence in Australia, especially directed at Aborigines.

Since 1991, 432 Aboriginal people have died in police custody. There were two fatal police shootings late last year of an 19-year-old Aboriginal man in the Northern Territory and a 29-year-old woman in Western Australia. Neither were posing a threat to the police when they were gunned down.

Monday’s police assault has provoked online discussion about earlier violent attacks, including the 2004 death of TJ Hickey, a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy in the inner-Sydney suburb of Redfern, not far from where Monday’s assault took place.

Hickey died when he was impaled on a fence after he was chased by a police car while riding his bike. The officers involved lied to official inquests and were never held to account.

The conditions facing Aboriginal youth, of endemic poverty, widespread unemployment and a lack of access to decent healthcare and education, are among the sharpest expressions of a broader assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

While Aborigines are disproportionately targeted for police violence, this is because they are the most oppressed section of the working class. Young people of all backgrounds are routinely harassed and intimidated by police, especially in the working-class suburbs of the major cities. Victims of police killings, moreover, are overwhelmingly poor or mentally-ill, regardless of racial background.

Over the past decades, state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, have vastly expanded the size of police forces, along with their powers, as part of a broader offensive against democratic rights. This is above all aimed at preparing for the repression of the social and political struggles of the working class that are now emerging internationally.



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