

Australia: Thousands protest Aboriginal deaths in custody

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Thousands of Australians rallied across the country on Saturday to protest the continuing scourge of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

This Thursday marks 30 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody handed down its report. Since that time, 474 indigenous people have died in police custody, including 5 since the beginning of last month.

The rallies featured emotional speeches by the families of the deceased, punctuated by frantic appeals to racialism and identity politics by entertainers and “activist” politicians. This narrative was at odds with the multi-racial composition of the protests, which demonstrated mass outrage and opposition to the mounting death toll of the most oppressed section of the working class.

The insistence that only Aboriginal voices should be heard at such protests has become standard practice, but Victorian Greens MP Lidia Thorpe put forward an even more divisive perspective. She told the Melbourne rally: “It’s black women that keep black women strong to continue the fight for justice in this country.”

Thorpe said the government was carrying out “sophisticated genocide to continue to annihilate the first people of this country,” and told the crowd, “you all need to help decolonise this place.”

Despite these radical claims, Thorpe guided protesters back to the parliamentary road, saying: “You have to support the ten demands from these families, not just rock up for a rally.”

The ten demands, compiled by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, centre around a call for “governments to sit down with us in transparent, open and honest conversations about solutions and proactive measures to effectively eradicate Black deaths in custody for future

generations.”

Some of the demands pointed to broader issues confronting Aboriginal people, including poverty-level welfare, a lack of funding for public education and healthcare, punitive policing and homelessness.

But the futility of such appeals to “official” channels is demonstrated by the fact that the first demand is for governments to “implement all recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.”

At the Melbourne rally, co-organiser Sue-Anne Hunter repeated the common refrain: “If we had implemented the recommendations from the Royal Commission, we wouldn’t be talking about these things now.”

In fact, around two-thirds of the recommendations have been followed. Claims to the contrary can only be understood as an effort to restore confidence in the ability of the bourgeois legal system to bring an end to the disgraceful situation.

Since the Royal Commission, the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody each year has increased by more than 50 percent. This growth is a product of a massive increase in the indigenous incarceration rate, which has more than doubled since 1995. In 2020, 2,333 out of every 100,000 Aboriginal people were incarcerated, higher than the rate of African Americans in the US.

The number and rate of non-Aboriginal deaths in custody is no better. Of 2,608 deaths analysed by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2018, 2,104 were of non-indigenous people. Aboriginal prisoners died at a rate of 0.13 percent compared to the overall rate of 0.21 for the whole prison population.

The difference lies in the fact that indigenous people make up 28 percent of prisoners but only 3 percent of

Australia's population.

This cannot be understood primarily as an issue of racism within the police or judicial system, but is a product of the fact that Aboriginal people are among the most oppressed members of the Australian working class. The 2011 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey found that 19.3 percent of indigenous people were living in poverty, compared to 12.4 percent of other Australians.

While the Royal Commission handed down 339 recommendations, it did not result in a single charge against a police or prison officer, and none have been laid in the three decades since.

In a sharp example of the dead end presented by these official inquiries, the Northern Territory Labor government last month announced that it would reverse changes to bail laws made in response to the 2017 Royal Commission into the Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory.

At the time, Labor Minister for Territory Families Dale Wakefield described the report as "possibly the most important document that our government has received."

But now, young people in the Territory will no longer be entitled to a presumption in favour of bail for offences including unlawful entry, unlawful use of a motor vehicle and assaulting police.

Under the proposed laws, children as young as 10 will face automatic bail revocation for "serious" breaches including failure to attend court, failure to complete youth diversion programs and alleged violations of "certain electronic monitoring conditions and curfew." This last point is significant as the government also announced its intention to expand police powers to fit children with electronic monitoring devices.

Aboriginal youth are overwhelmingly the target of such "tough on crime" measures, at times making up 100 percent of the Territory's youth detention population.

The most recent Aboriginal person to die in custody was a 45-year-old inmate at Perth's maximum security Casuarina Prison. He died in the Intensive Care Unit of Fiona Stanley Hospital on April 3 after undergoing a medical procedure.

The prison is currently the subject of legal action, with two indigenous prisoners claiming in the Western

Australian Supreme Court that they have been held in solitary confinement more than 20 hours per day for months on end and denied recreation time.

Just over two weeks earlier, a 37-year-old man was killed in a police pursuit in the western New South Wales town of Broken Hill. Police claim that the victim, Anzac Sullivan, suffered a "medical episode" after attempting to flee and could not be resuscitated.

The young age of the two latest victims is a reflection of the much broader health crisis confronting Aboriginal people. Life expectancy for Aboriginal people is 8-9 years shorter than for the general population, and the rates of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease for indigenous Australians are among the highest in the world.

The fight to prevent further deaths in custody, regardless of race, can only be carried out on the basis of a broader struggle to end the appalling social conditions that lead to the high rate of imprisonment for Australia's most vulnerable layers. This requires the unified struggle of the entire working class which, under the pretext of the pandemic, is experiencing a sustained assault on working and living conditions.

Saturday's rallies, and the massive protests that took place last year despite a campaign of suppression by governments and police, demonstrate that there is support for such change among broad layers of the population.

While the latest round of protests are rooted in the genuine and justified outrage of the ordinary people, the racist narrative promoted by the organisers will only serve to divide and suppress a genuine movement of the working class against all forms of class oppression.



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