

Australia: Queensland Labor government expanding brutal imprisonment of children

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The Labor Party government in the Australian state of Queensland is implementing harsh new policies against a purported youth “crime wave.” Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk’s government boasts that the new measures are the “toughest in the nation.”

In March, Queensland’s government overrode the state’s Human Rights Act, and disregarded international human rights law norms, by criminalising a breach of bail by a child. After only three months in effect, police data shows that 299 children were charged under the new breach of bail.

Over the course of less than two months, six children aged 11 were charged with 30 combined breach of bail offences.

The state government’s new laws also make it harder for youth to get bail if they are currently on bail or have bail history. Children can now be arrested on mere “suspicion” that they have or will contravene bail conditions.

So harsh are the new bail laws, that youth are accepting charges in order to avoid more time behind bars while court proceedings are underway.

“This has led to a situation where young people are pleading guilty to the charges to get out of detention, because the time spent on remand is often longer than the sentence they would have received,” lawyer and chief executive of the Youth Advocacy Centre, Katherine Hayes said in a recent article in the *Guardian*.

On March 15 of this year, there were 337 children in detention in Queensland. Of these, 88 percent are unsentenced. The number of 10–17-year-olds in Queensland’s detention centres has ballooned in recent years, averaging 200 in 2019–20, and just 137 in 2011–12.

Two-thirds of nights spent in detention were

indigenous juveniles, among the most impoverished and vulnerable sections of the Australian working class. Indigenous children make up less than 10 percent of Queensland’s 10–17-year-old population.

Queensland already has by far the highest number of children in detention, with the next highest state, New South Wales, with 190 in juvenile detention on average per day in 2021–22. New South Wales has a population nearly double that of Queensland.

The number of youths in detention in Queensland exceeds the total capacity of existing facilities. This has meant that many children are currently held in adult police watch houses.

To keep up with increased children in detention, the Queensland government has announced the building of two new juvenile prisons.

There are currently three youth prisons in Queensland. The Brisbane Youth Detention centre in the state capital has 162 beds. The West Moreton Youth Detention Centre near Brisbane has 32 beds. Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in the northern city of Townsville has 112 beds. Combined, the existing facilities have a capacity of 306.

One new juvenile detention facility is confirmed to be built adjacent to an existing prison 60 kilometres north of Brisbane. A location is being chosen near the northern city Cairns for the other new centre. These locations are part of the state government’s goal of providing “more regional youth detention services,” to supposedly facilitate “connection to family, community and country” while the children languish in the youth prisons.

The call for “tough” measures against youth crime has bipartisan support. The bail breach laws were previously implemented under the Liberal-National Coalition government, now in opposition. Labor

removed the laws when it came to power in the state in 2015 before reintroducing them this year.

Despite the regressive and punitive new laws, Coalition opposition leader David Crisafulli said at the Liberal-National Party Annual Convention in Brisbane last weekend that Palaszczuk's government's "decision to weaken the laws when they first came to power put ideology over common sense."

Crisafulli said last week that the Palaszczuk Labor government wasn't going far enough to tackle what he called a "youth crime crisis" and that the government's latest "tough" measures were just "tinkering around the edges."

The opposition leader joins the Labor government in a chorus of media and political establishment voices who claim that there is a youth "crime wave" in Queensland. Crisafulli asserted a rise since 2015 of break-ins, vehicle theft and assaults to justify the hysteria.

But experts such as former Queensland children's court president and current chair of the Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council, John Robertson, say the statistics "completely refute" the claim that there is a major youth crime crisis in Queensland.

Experts also warn that punitive measures like detention, where youth suffer horrendous conditions in understaffed and under-resourced facilities, have negative impacts on the children's wellbeing and lead to higher rates of recidivism.

Rooms in the detention centres are smaller than in an average Australian home. An investigation by the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation in February revealed the torturous treatment of a 13-year-old boy held in virtual solitary confinement in the Cleveland centre.

The boy spent more than 20 hours a day for 78 days in solitude. The youth had been using drugs since age 10, had foetal alcohol syndrome and suffered abuse at the hands of his father.

The *Guardian* reported in June that an intellectually disabled boy in the same centre spent 515 out of his 744-day remand in solitary confinement.

Across the country, working-class children are bearing the brunt of an attack on the most basic civil liberties. Similar youth crime measures were implemented by a Labor government in the Northern Territory in 2021, including the policy of criminalising

bail breach.

Reports of torture of children, mostly indigenous, in the Northern Territory Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in 2014 shocked workers and youth across Australia. Incidents included the tear gassing of six young boys. Further reports revealed the appalling conditions of the cells in the facility and inhumane extended periods of solitary confinement.

In 2015, one of the boys who was tear gassed, Dylan Voller, was involved in an incident where he threatened to break his hand, and officers restrained him in a chair with a hood on and left him for two hours.

In South Australia at the Kurlana Tapa Youth Detention Centre, recent reports have been published in the *Guardian* of children locked in their cells for an average of 15 hours, and up to 23. Some of these children have turned to self-harm to get out of confinement.

The attacks on the most basic democratic rights of working-class youth reflects the sharp growth of social tensions.

Workers and their families are facing an immense social crisis. Soaring inflation, the rising cost of living and mortgages, and falling or stagnating wages are accompanied by budget cuts to education, health and welfare. Meanwhile, billions are spared for the military as the Australian government prepares for a US-led confrontation with China.

As the social crisis continues to worsen, the governments in Australia and internationally, representing the interests of big business, have nothing to offer ordinary people. Instead, the onslaught on social conditions is accompanied by an offensive against civil liberties. The attacks fall most sharply on the most oppressed and exploited layers, such as the incarcerated children, but they are directed against the rights of the entire working class.



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