

Australia: Queensland Labor government further expands brutal detention of children

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For the second time this year, the Labor government in Queensland has rushed through parliament laws to lock up more children, again suspending the state's Human Rights Act to do so.

Last Thursday, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk's government pushed through "urgent" amendments to the Youth Justice Act to legitimise the act of locking up children in adult cells.

There is now no limit to how long a child can be held in an adult detention centre. The amendments also allow the state government to establish detention centres at police watch houses.

Hundreds of children are in overflowing detention centres because of the government's draconian measures, including the legislation it introduced in March to allow children to be imprisoned for breaching bail conditions.

Under the false banner of addressing a "youth crime wave," the Labor Party is introducing laws that punish alleged criminal offenders aged as young as 10, even though its own official statistics show a decline in youth crime over the past decade.

Labor is acting in partnership with sections of the media, especially the Murdoch outlets. Scaremongering headlines in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, a Murdoch tabloid, over the past month have included: "KID CRIM HORROR," "BRAZEN CRIMS SHOW NO FEAR" and "CRIM CYCLE ON REPEAT; YOUTH CRIMS REOFFENDING AT SHOCKING RATE."

The government also announced a new "rapid response" police taskforce to target "youth crime hotspots." This is part of a \$446 million package to boost police resources and "tackle the complex cause of youth crime and support community safety."

With the three existing youth detention centres full to their capacity of 306 in total, the government has been holding children in adult police watch houses. Most of them are on remand, often waiting months for trials without having been convicted of an offence.

The Labor government is reinstating reactionary measures imposed by the widely-hated Campbell Newman Liberal National Party government, which was thrown out of office in 2015 after just one four-year term, during which it slashed social services and public sector jobs.

This is the context of a rally outside Queensland parliament house in Brisbane last Wednesday, organised on Facebook by Voice For Victims. This organisation was founded by Ben Cannon, whose neighbour was stabbed in a home invasion in 2021. Cannon has met privately with government ministers.

About 300 people joined the rally, which called for even tougher measures against young people. That was a relatively small turnout, given the media prominence given to it. Murdoch's Sky News had heavily promoted the protest, saying it would be "big" and declaring that a youth crime crisis had "exploded" in 2023.

The Voice For Victims group was formed as a "reaction to the inaction of government to effectively control the scourge of youth crime in our communities," according to its Facebook page. "The volume of violent crimes is increasing and that's the fear, that more people will die," Cannon said at the rally.

Voice For Victims has a similar name to groups in the US and UK. Some of these people may just be misguided but they are being exploited by right-wing forces that are whipping up fears of crime amid a deepening cost-of-living, housing and social crisis.

Police chiefs are also beating the drum. Following an

incident in the regional city of Toowoomba in March, Queensland Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll claimed: “What we clearly see in the statistics in the last 12 months, there is a spike that we have seen, not only in Toowoomba but across the state as well.”

However, as the data shows, there is no crime wave. The Queensland Government Statistician’s Office conducted an independent report. It found that the total child offender count had fallen 27 percent in the decade to 2020-21.

The rate of unique child offenders had declined to 1,926.4 per 100,000 persons aged 10-17 years old, compared to 2,792.8 per 100,000 in 2012-13. This was the lowest level recorded in 10 years. The number of unique adult offenders, aged over 18, had declined also from 2,811.3 per 100,000 in 2012-13 to 2,276.6 per 100,000.

Nevertheless, Police Minister Mark Ryan tried to justify the new laws by saying: “While the rate of unique youth offenders and rate of unique adult offenders has declined ... the reality is that there is a hardcore group of recidivist offenders who have to be held accountable.”

Advocates have pointed to the cruel impact of the laws. Youth Advocacy Centre chief executive Katherine Hayes told the *National Indigenous Times* in June that her organisation was seeing children plead guilty to offences to avoid spending time in detention.

“We have seen children plead guilty to charges because they are less likely to receive a sentence. Whilst if they are on remand, they are highly likely to be held in detention—often for a number of months... Over 80 percent of children in detention are on remand.” Hayes said young people were kept in detention for crimes unlikely to carry a custodial sentence.

The government is defying the advice and objections of a wide range of support, legal and advocacy services that declared in an open letter:

“Queensland already has some of the toughest laws and the highest number of children imprisoned in Australia. Despite decreasing youth crime rates, the number of children held in Queensland detention centres continues to increase. In 2021-22, with detention centres overflowing, around 470 Queensland children—some as young as 10—were held in adult watchhouses for periods of up to 14 days. A

watchhouse is not a fit place for a child.

“The gross over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in detention—over 70%—continues to draw shame on the world stage.”

The open letter cited research by the Queensland Family and Child Commission and others that “found that most children in detention have experienced violence within their homes, poverty, homelessness or the absence of a safe place to call home, and/or exposure to alcohol and other substance misuse.”

As the open letter indicates, there are evident signs of social distress, which is being produced by the increasingly desperate living conditions now confronting working-class households, especially the most vulnerable. Indigenous youth may be particularly targeted, but this is a wider class issue.

Social tensions are rising, with wages falling behind inflation, rising costs of living and cuts to health, welfare and education, while billions of dollars are being spent to prepare for a US-led war with China in the midst of a NATO-Russia proxy war in Ukraine.

The brutal measures being adopted by the Labor government in Queensland, initially against the most oppressed layers of the population, are a warning of the police-state type conditions to which governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, will resort more broadly against the working class as the social and political crisis deepens.



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