

Australia: Psychologist reveals “horrors” for children in Queensland police cells

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Queensland’s Labor government, now led by “Left” faction Premier Steven Miles, is inflicting systemic “child abuse” on child detainees, as young as 10, mostly indigenous, who are being locked up in overcrowded police cells.

On January 15, Andrea Bates, a senior psychologist treating children in the Cairns police watch house in the state’s north, sent a detailed, seven-page open letter to senior Queensland government ministers and officials exposing the horrific conditions children face there.

Before outlining the abuses, Bates wrote that she felt compelled to circulate the letter because “my colleagues and I have raised these issues below, many, many, times only to be ignored.”

In fact, the situation had worsened to an unprecedented level. “In all my years and experience working in government, NGOs and private practice, I have never witnessed the horrors we are currently expected to manage and have been managing for quite some time now.”

Due to an overflow of detainees, children were being deprived of their basic rights. They were often underfed and denied any yard time for up to two days, isolated in cramped cells, treated like convicts.

There was no sense of privacy in the facilities, as there are “four to a cell at a time, having to urinate in front of each other. Mattresses on the floors. Open shower cubicles such that they feel embarrassed to shower.”

Despite the cells being designed for only one or two-night stays for adults, Bates said she had seen some children who had been detained for 20 days.

In fact, that abuse grew sharply last year. A Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) police watch house report published in November found that in 2022, 21 children were detained for 15

days or more. In just the first six months of 2023, 108 children were held for more than two weeks. During that six months, the daily number of children in Queensland watch houses averaged more than 50.

In her letter, Bates said the conditions were so poor that it was difficult to perform her job as a psychologist. It was “exceptionally difficult to gauge their mental health state in an interview room, through a thick wall of glass with prisoners, both adult and child alike, screaming, yelling and banging.”

Bates told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” television program: “I just don’t understand why those abhorrent conditions are not accepted in the community but somehow they’re accepted ... by the government. At the end of the day, it’s child abuse.”

There is no doubt that this is a deliberate Labor government offensive against youth. Indigenous children in particular are suffering immensely, having to endure atrocious conditions while on remand, awaiting court hearings.

This is occurring amid a social crisis threatening working-class families with hunger and homelessness, as rent and food prices skyrocket, and wages fall far below the soaring cost of living.

Last year, the Labor government resorted to police-state measures. It twice overrode the state’s Human Rights Act to allow children to be imprisoned for breaching bail condition and to abolish limits on how long a child can be held in an adult detention centre.

That was despite official statistics showing a decline in youth-related crime in Queensland over the past decade. In fact, the 2021–22 financial year saw a record low in youth offenders, with 1,926.4 per 100,000 persons aged 10–17 years old, compared to 2,792.8 in 2012–13.

Bureaucratically installed by Labor and trade union

faction bosses as premier in mid-December, Miles is a committed proponent of the youth crackdown. In his first statement as premier, he vowed a greater offensive against “youth crime,” declaring it was “unacceptably high.”

Furthermore, Miles pledged that “the police will always have my strong backing to keep Queenslanders safe,” essentially giving the police carte blanche to continue aggressive arrests and punitive detentions.

Miles also effectively blamed working-class parents for the supposed youth crime wave. He claimed that “many kids don’t have strong role models and even their parents let them down.”

Under the guise of supporting “community safety” and tackling “the complex cause of youth crime,” the government announced a “rapid response” police taskforce to target “youth crime hotspots.”

Such draconian measures have resulted in the state’s three youth detention centres becoming full to their capacity of 306, without enough staff to manage the facilities. Children are kept in adult police watch houses, with most on remand, often waiting months for trials without any conviction of an offence.

In its November report, QFCC principal commissioner Luke Twyford said there had been a “shocking escalation” in the amount of time children spent in watch houses.

The QFCC study also found that indigenous children were “21 times more likely to be held in youth detention in comparison with non-indigenous children, meaning Queensland’s increasing use of watch houses is grossly and disproportionately affecting First Nations children.” Indigenous children were frequently denied bail due to alleged “family circumstances.”

Twyford added that “watch houses are not appropriate places to hold children, potentially exposing them to violent behaviour, which is harmful, retraumatising and does not reduce the likelihood of reoffending.”

Defending the police regime, Sergeant Damien Taylor, a senior police officer stationed at the Cairns watch house, sent an email to various agencies complaining of “unrealistic expectations.” He claimed police simply could not meet the basic necessities for the child detainees, like food and toilet paper. He called on third parties to, “feed them and give them snacks they request that watch house staff cannot always do,

due to the busy nature of the watch house.”

Taylor cited the high police arrest rate to justify the conditions. “Today alone over a two-hour period we had over 10 fresh arrests ... watch house staff cannot just stop and deal with juvenile needs as they demand it.”

Likewise, the Labor government has rejected all criticism. When asked about Bates’ open letter, Police Minister Mark Ryan cited a heavily media-promoted campaign by “victims of crime” groups. “When you have stronger laws with harsher penalties you end up with more people in custody,” he said. “Many people in the community have asked for those stronger laws.”

Last year, as deputy premier, Miles resolutely defended the legislation that abolished limits to the amount of time a child can be held in a police watch house. He claimed that legal advice said it was the only way to “keep the community safe.”

Now that Miles is premier, the attacks on youth will only intensify as the social, financial and housing crisis facing working-class households escalates, further exposing the repressive, pro-corporate role of the union-backed Labor government and its federal, state and territory counterparts.



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