

Australia: Queensland Labor government moves to further bolster police powers against youth

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31 March 2024

Queensland's state Labor government, which already has some of the most draconian laws against "youth crime," is going even further.

This follows a media and political witch hunt after an elderly woman was fatally stabbed during an apparent car theft attempt at a shopping centre in the outer Brisbane working-class suburb of Redbank Plains in early February.

Five teenagers were quickly arrested and a 16-year-old boy of African background was charged with murder.

At a media conference following the tragedy, the victim's daughter, Cindy Micallef, appealed for peace and unity in the community. "Mum's legacy will live on in peace," she said. "She was never one to be prejudiced, she always looked for the best in people."

Standing alongside Micallef, Queensland African Communities Council president Beny Bol issued a similar call. He said there had been "a lot of verbal abuse" on social media. "What you see is people living within the community trying to find who to blame."

However, Bol said, "the support that's been pouring out has been overwhelming. A tiny number of people making those comments with very loud voices should not take the attention away from that."

These comments pointed to the need for understanding of the socio-economic conditions underlying issues of crime, but the frenzied response by the media and government was the complete opposite, demanding harsher measures against youth, greater police powers and deportations.

Queensland Police Union president Ian Leavers, a right-wing advocate of ever-greater police powers, led the charge. He denounced "latte-sipping judges living

in wealthy suburbs," accusing them of being "out of touch" in granting bail to young defendants.

State Labor Premier Steven Miles was not far behind. He called for immigrants to be stripped of their rights when charged with offences. "No more mollycoddling these people and saying they've got rights," Miles stated. "Well, they lose their rights when they commit serious crimes."

Miles blamed parents for youth crime, which has not seen a rise in the state, including in the Redbank Plains area. His attack ignored the deteriorating social conditions, particularly for young people, in working-class areas.

Redbank Plains is typical of the suburbs worst hit by the cost-of-living and housing crisis across the country. It is a sprawling outer suburban working-class area with an average income level about two-thirds that of the entire Brisbane metropolitan region. It is among the lowest 10 percent of suburbs nationally on an Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage, with an unemployment rate of around 8 percent, or about double the national average.

African and other immigrant youth are among the most disadvantaged sections of the working class, along with indigenous youth. The Queensland government already jails more children, many of them indigenous, than any other Australian state.

A Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) report last year found a "significant level of over-representation" of indigenous children in the state's adult police watch houses, and the indigenous population as a whole is grossly over-represented in Australia's prisons.

Although indigenous youth are especially targeted by

police, this is a wider working-class issue. Research by the Queensland Family and Child Commission 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.

Miles has suggested opening children's courts to the corporate media after access was denied in relation to the stabbing. In Queensland and other Australian states, children's cases are held in closed courts to protect the privacy of vulnerable youth.

This month, Miles indicated his government's readiness to join the right-wing opposition Liberal National Party in removing criminal law provisions that detention be a "last resort" for children and teenagers. After initially opposing the proposal, saying the expert evidence showed that incarceration only worsened the likelihood of youth crime, Miles shifted ground. He told reporters he would consider the measure if a parliamentary youth justice reform select committee recommended it.

"We will continue to back our police and support them with ... tough laws to keep people safe," Miles declared.

Since being installed as premier last December by Labor's "Left" faction trade union powerbrokers, Miles has continued the war on "youth crime" pursued under his predecessor Annastacia Palaszczuk.

Last year, the Labor government twice suspended the state's Human Rights Act, the first time to abolish limits on how long children can be held in adult detention centres. In August, it rushed through legislation punishing criminal offenders aged as young as 10.

The government also announced a "rapid response" police taskforce to target youth crime "hotspots," under the guise of community safety. Since then, the three youth detention centres have become full to their capacity of 306. The taskforce has arrested over 1,000 young people on more than 3,000 offences.

Yet, this flies in the face of the crime statistics. The Ipswich city municipality, which includes Redbank Plains, has followed the general crime trends statewide, with a decrease over the past 20 years, from 200 offenders out of 100,000, to an average of 60 last year.

Youth crime has been at its lowest point in ten years. The 2021–22 financial year saw 1,926.4 youth

offenders per 100,000, compared to 2,792.8 in 2012–13.

Nevertheless, in 2023 an additional 10,000 people went through Queensland's watch houses compared to 2022. Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll attributed this to a commitment to address the "escalating" problem of youth crime.

The conditions that young people confront in adult police watch houses are horrific. They are forced into small, overcrowded rooms, with insufficient bedding. They are often underfed and denied any yard time for up to two days. There is no privacy in these facilities. A senior psychologist treating children in the Cairns watch house explained in a letter to the Queensland government, 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."

Miles, a Labor "left" like Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, is now on the frontline of demonising working-class youth and ramping up repressive police measures under conditions of deepening social and political discontent.

Near Redbank Plains, in the suburb of Inala, which has among the lowest income levels and highest unemployment rates in Queensland, Labor lost almost half its primary vote in a state by-election this month.

Labor's vote fell by around 30 percentage points to less than 35 percent, reflecting developing hostility, not just to the worsening social crisis since Labor took office federally in 2022, but also to its intensifying commitment to US militarism, including the AUKUS military pact against China and the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

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



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