

# Australian teenagers oppose police repression, social media ban after beach clash

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On December 17, police attacked around 200 teenagers who had gathered at Mordialloc beach in Melbourne's southeast, triggering a disturbance that spilled into a nearby supermarket.

The corporate media and the state Labor government in Victoria seized on the event to call for an intensification of their "law and order" campaign against working-class youth amid growing social and political tensions.

On a scorching hot day during school holidays, youth from working-class suburbs across Melbourne converged on Mordialloc beach, a common kind of gathering organised via social media.

According to eyewitnesses who spoke to the WSWS, what followed was not a pre-planned "youth riot" as the media and government claim, but a confused chain of events sparked by a heavily-armed police operation involving the Public Order Response Team—the riot squad—and a hovering helicopter.

Police flooded the area, confronting crowds of teenagers as young as 12 and 13. Officers used pepper spray and force, provoking panic, fear and anger. Video footage shows an officer slamming at least one teenager to the ground.

Some of the youth then ran through the nearby Woolworths supermarket, knocking over stock, throwing milk and filming on their phones. This was a chaotic and angry response to the events rather than organised looting, with many youths simply swept along in the rush.?

One individual—a 15-year-old boy from the working-class suburbs of Greater Dandenong—was arrested on suspicion of "affray" and assaulting police, interviewed and then released pending further enquiries.

The next day, a second gathering of teenagers and reports of two assaults led to police descending on Mordialloc beach again. However, the police had to report that the supposed victims did not wish police involvement.

The state Labor government and police have sought to paint the events as a violent attack by youth hellbent on causing harm to society. It is being used to justify a stepped-up assault on basic civil liberties, particularly targeting working-class youth.

Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan condemned the event as "disgraceful," "disrespectful" and "violent." Victorian deputy police commissioner Bob Hill branded the teenagers as a "marauding brat pack." He vowed that the police would not stop until they had found and questioned every teenager recorded on CCTV or police body-worn cameras.

This response—saturation policing, media hysteria and calls for even harsher measures—comes just after the federal Labor government of Anthony Albanese imposed an unprecedented nationwide ban on social media access for under-16s, cynically justified in the name of "protecting mental health" and curbing youth crime.

In reality, the ruling class views social media as dangerous not because it breeds violence but because it has allowed millions of young people to see, discuss and oppose the horrors of imperialist war, social inequality and police repression.

Victoria's Labor government also introduced so-called "Adult Time for Violent Crime" laws last month which allow children as young as 14 to be tried in adult courts, with sentences up to life imprisonment.

The state and federal governments are also exploiting the reactionary terrorist attack at Sydney's Bondi Beach on December 14, which killed 15 people at a Hanukkah celebration, to ban political gatherings and justify sweeping new "hate speech" legislation. These laws seek to outlaw criticism of Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank, after more than two years of protests in Australia and internationally, involving millions of workers and youth.

Members of the International Youth and Students for

Social Equality (IYSSE)—the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—spoke with teenagers in Mordialloc following the events.

Far from the image promoted by the government and media of mindless, feral youth whipped into violence by social media, discussions with teenagers reveal a generation that is increasingly aware of political issues, hostile to the social media ban and distrustful of the political establishment.?

**Francesca, Rihanna** and **Darshan** live in Mordialloc. They were not at the beach on the day of the clash with the police, but some of their friends were.

On the severity of the police response, Darshan said: “They dragged it too far. The police could be going catching drug dealers, going out catching murderers, and they’re out here pepper spraying kids. Of course, stealing is bad, but no one should have been pepper sprayed.”

The three teenagers opposed Labor’s social media ban for under-16s. Rihanna said: “This will give more of a reason to have retaliation against the government, which is probably part of the incident. I think the news coverage of what happened was bad.”

Francesca added: “Young kids already have a bad feeling about the government. They don’t have much respect. So now when the government takes away something which honestly in this day and age is very normal, kids are going to retaliate.”

Rihanna commented: “That whole group at the beach was under 16, no one older than that. The government is just really negative towards us. What do we do? There’s all this talk about youth crime. Banning social media won’t help because it actually helps a lot of young people.”

Asked whether they thought the social media ban was in the interests of young people’s mental health, Darshan said: “No I wouldn’t say so. I get how for some kids it affects them badly, but others have a positive influence from social media and they get better, they’re happier texting their mates, scrolling a little bit, doing all of that when you’re under 16. I also get a lot of information from news articles through social media.”

He went on: “Honestly, because of the ban I’m probably going to see a lot less news. On Snapchat, I used to see news articles and information on people’s stories. So my sources of information will go down a lot after this.”

Rihanna said: “My source of news is TikTok. It’s interesting considering we’re the only country doing a ban like this. Maybe the government’s doing it so that

they’re viewed as looking after safety. But there’s actually a lot more tough stuff that kids go through here than bad mental health because of social media.”

Darshan added: “There’s a lot of reasons why kids don’t trust the government. They don’t keep their word. They could help us out to stop things like drugs or crime.”

The three students said they had been following the Israeli genocide in Gaza via social media over the past two years.

“I think Israel’s committing a genocide against the Palestinian people,” Darshan said. “It’s not fair killing innocent people, kids, and just cutting off food supplies. They’re killing basically the entire community of people.”

Rihanna added: “And we only know this type of stuff because of social media. So taking that away from us is just weird. There’s a lot of stuff like that on social media that isn’t shown anywhere else. It’s great that it does introduce young people to wars and politics.

“And when you think about what people in Palestine are going through, is social media use by kids really what the government wants to focus on, when there are people out there dying? It’s a distraction.”

The students opposed the Labor government’s new youth crime laws. “It’s very bad, it scares young people,” Francesca said. “Kids that age aren’t really old enough to know what’s good and bad. They can change their life around. A lot of people do, and the government shouldn’t ruin their life when they’re that young.”



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