

Australia: Macquarie Fields—the political issues

by Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The events in the western Sydney suburb of Macquarie Fields since February 25, when two teenagers died in a police car chase, raise decisive political questions, not just for local youth and residents in the area but for all working people.

The deaths of Matthew Robertson, 19, and a 17-year-old youth, as a result of a high-speed police pursuit through the residential streets of the Glenquarie housing estate was not an isolated event. The tragedy was part of a wider pattern of police harassment and provocation directed against working class youth. In Macquarie Fields, like many similar suburbs across Australia, dangerous police chases have become a common occurrence, accompanied by the constant stopping and questioning of young people on the streets. In this instance, it was obvious that the police had no need to chase the allegedly stolen car—the boys involved had been under police electronic surveillance for several days beforehand.

Once the deaths sparked protests and accusations against the police, the response of the New South Wales (NSW) state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr was to mobilise hundreds of police, including heavily-armed riot squads, in a series of provocations that triggered several nights of violent clashes. Macquarie Fields became a testing ground for new methods of suppressing social unrest. Police cordoned off the suburb, while riot units confronted and taunted youth on the streets. Police wielding machine guns stormed houses, police dogs were set upon demonstrators, and helicopters buzzed overhead, spotlighting homes and individuals.

For decades, Macquarie Fields and the neighbouring suburbs of the federal electorate of Werriwa have been represented by Australian Labor Party (ALP) members of parliament. Yet, not one ALP figure has expressed even the slightest regret over the deaths of the two boys or sympathy and compassion towards their families, let alone opposed the police-state methods unleashed by the Carr government.

The most politically significant statement came from Carr himself. On February 28, just before the fourth night of clashes, he declared: “There are no excuses for this behaviour and I’m not going to have it said that this behaviour is caused by social disadvantage... There’s only one blame here and that is the people who went out and threw bricks and caused riots. There’s only one thing to say to them: the police will get them, because they are engaged in illegal behaviour.”

Carr’s comments constitute an open repudiation of the basic conception, held since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, that the intellectual and personal development of individuals is fundamentally a product of their social, cultural and economic environment. From this it flows that it is impossible to overcome the problems of crime, substance abuse, ignorance or mental illness without eliminating poverty and uplifting the conditions of social life.

In the early years of the labour movement, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this understanding was at the centre of the fight for equality and democratic rights. It animated every struggle for higher wages, shorter working hours, safe working conditions, free public education, decent health care, quality housing, state funding of the arts and public ownership of basic services.

In the past, working people in Australia supported Labor primarily because they believed it was the vehicle for winning social reforms that would substantially improve their living standards and working conditions. Now, as far as Carr is concerned, it is impermissible to even suggest a link between unemployment, criminal behaviour and acute social disadvantage.

When several academics objected to Carr’s stance, pointing to the multitudes of studies demonstrating myriad connections between poverty, social tensions and crime, the premier only deepened his position. He declared that while he recognised the “so-called disadvantage” of Macquarie Fields, the problem was one of “hardened career criminals”. Carr ruled out making any new spending commitments “because that would be interpreted as a knee-jerk government response to anti-social and criminal behaviour”. By this logic, working class youth are simply born with criminal tendencies, or acquire them at an early age. The problems are individual, not social, and the only answer is an ever more brutal police crackdown.

Carr’s position sums up the outlook of an entire political, business and media establishment that has no solutions for, or policies to even address, the severe social crisis revealed by the eruption in Macquarie Fields. That was underlined by the March 1 editorial in the erstwhile small “l” liberal newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It accused the academics of “blame-shifting” and “giving succour” to the “victim mentality” of “rioters”. In other words, anyone who challenges the vicious reaction of the state and suggests that the social roots of the violent clashes must be addressed is simply helping to foment riots.

Increasingly, the only official response to social deprivation is stepped-up police repression, targetted against young people in particular. Already NSW jails are bulging, with Carr recently claiming that the streets were “safer” because the state’s prison population had topped the 9,000 mark for the first time in history, a 50 percent increase in a decade. NSW now has one of the highest incarceration rates in the developed world. Far from making ordinary people safer, the criminalisation of growing numbers of young people has only exacerbated the vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, mental illness and crime.

More fundamentally, the question needs to be asked: what kind of society measures progress in terms of growing imprisonment? It is

one that cannot provide the most basic requirements for the intellectual, physical and cultural development of its younger generation. Instead, the discontent resulting from the lack of any possibility for self-fulfillment and a decent life is met with immediate repression. And this is no recent development. The methods being used in Macquarie Fields have been pioneered for well over a decade by successive Australian governments against the most vulnerable layers of society—refugees and asylum seekers. For the crime of seeking a better life, they are treated as nothing but criminals: subjected to harassment, mandatory detention—in some cases for many years—and the destruction of their most fundamental legal rights.

There is a deep-going connection between the trampling of democratic rights at home and the prosecution of war abroad. Howard's participation in the criminal invasion of Iraq was carried out in open contempt of the rights of the Iraqi people, as well as the sentiments of ordinary Australians, on the basis of lies, distortion and deception—all of which were supported by the Labor Party. Under the auspices of the "war on terrorism" the entire political establishment has united to push through unprecedented inroads into basic civil liberties, including handing over to the police sweeping new powers.

The clashes in Macquarie Fields—a largely white working class area—have undoubtedly shocked many people. Similar scenes in the inner-Sydney area of Redfern and on Palm Island last year, following police involvement in the deaths of Aborigines, were portrayed as isolated expressions of anger among indigenous people over institutionalised state racism. In reality, the confrontations in all three areas—Redfern, Palm Island and Macquarie Fields—arise from the same underlying causes—disadvantage and class oppression.

Together with the other large public housing-dominated suburbs between Liverpool and Campbelltown, Macquarie Fields is one of the most graphic examples of the mounting social inequality produced by decades of free market policies implemented by Labor and Liberal governments alike. The jobs, wages, conditions and welfare entitlements of working people have been slashed in order to satisfy the demands of global corporations and wealthy investors for lower tax rates, cheaper labour and greater profits. Through downsizing, outsourcing and privatisation, full-time, permanent jobs have been replaced increasingly by insecure, temporary and part-time employment.

Families in suburbs like Macquarie Fields have paid the heaviest price, with poverty becoming deeply entrenched, generation after generation. In terms of average incomes, employment, housing quality, access to higher education and public transport services, the area is among the most deprived in the country. Officially, the suburb's unemployment rate is 11.3 percent, more than twice the national average. But this figure disguises the real jobless situation. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data, only 53 percent of adult residents are employed.

It is more than 30 years since the ALP has put forward policies that even promised to improve the lot of the working class. Instead, whether in government or in opposition, Labor has worked to undermine the living standards and social services of the majority of the population. Public housing, like education, health and transport, has been deliberately run-down to force people into the private market. Just a day after Carr's statement, for example, the state's auditor-general revealed that only 35 percent of public housing accommodation met the government's own maintenance standards, because of a \$650 million backlog of repairs.

These appalling conditions are another stark expression of the

bankruptcy and collapse of social reformism. From a party that once advocated limited reforms within the framework of capitalism, advancing the illusion that the private profit system could be modified to provide social justice, the ALP has been transformed into an agency for dismantling all the past concessions made to the working class.

Vast economic changes bound up with the globalisation of production over the past three decades have shattered Labor's former program of placing pressure on employers and governments within a nationally-protected and regulated economy. Driven by relentless global competition for markets and profits, transnational corporations today demand, as the price for their investment, continual cutbacks to working class living standards and basic rights in each country.

How can this vast social reversal be combatted? Throwing rocks and petrol bombs at the police—the uniformed representatives of the state—in no way addresses the fundamental problem. Moreover, while the anger and hostility of the youth in Macquarie Fields towards the actions of the police are entirely understandable, their reactions are playing directly into the hands of the state. The riots are being used—by Carr, the media and the police—to justify even harsher repression. Some of the participants already face charges of riot and affray that could see them locked away for years.

Disgust and alienation towards the official political establishment do not, of themselves, constitute a political alternative. Workers and youth must draw lessons from the betrayals of the Labor Party, the trade unions and the collapse of social reformism and turn to the development of a new political party, based on an entirely different program and perspective—socialist internationalism—whose goal is the complete transformation of society on the basis of social need, not private profit. This is the only way in which the root causes of war, inequality, unemployment and state repression can be eliminated.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the Werriwa by-election to take forward the fight for this perspective. We urge all those who agree with us to support our campaign, and join and build the SEP as the new political party of the working class.

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