

Protests denounce violent abuses in Australian juvenile jails

By our reporters
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Demonstrations and marches were held in Australian cities last Saturday to protest against the horrific abuses being committed against boys, mostly indigenous, in Northern Territory (NT) juvenile detention centres. Almost 2,000 people rallied in Melbourne, with around 500 in Sydney. Protests also occurred in Adelaide, Darwin, Canberra, Perth and some regional centres.

Workers, students and professional people voiced shock and outrage at vulnerable children as young as 10 being assaulted, stripped naked, tear-gassed, hooded and strapped and kept in tiny, foul isolation cells for up to 17 days at a time. The images, and interviews with some of the victims, were screened on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program last Monday night.

Placards on the rallies included "Stop the torture!" "Where is justice?" and "Children are precious." There was widespread hostility toward the move by the federal and NT governments to convene a joint royal commission, headed by a former NT chief justice, in order to whitewash the abuses and protect the governments and officials responsible.

But the rally organisers, from a group called Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR), channeled the deeply-felt anger and disgust into divisive black nationalism, blaming "whites" for the brutality. The speakers depicted the violence as a purely racial issue, covering over the class issues.

In reality, the cruelty on display in the NT facilities is simply the most severe expression of the increasingly repressive measures being perpetrated across the country against youth and working class people as economic and social conditions deteriorate. While indigenous youth are far more likely to be incarcerated, that is because they are among the most oppressed layers of the working class, along with refugees and

immigrant families.

While speakers condemned the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the NT Country Liberal Party government of Chief Minister Adam Giles, there was silence on the role of successive Labor governments, which have presided over the soaring prison incarceration rates and worsening levels of indigenous imprisonment during the past quarter century.

At the Sydney rally, speakers from pseudo-left groups played a key role in this political diversion, while hiding their party affiliations. They also promoted the Greens, a capitalist party that has become a pivotal part of the political establishment over the same period.

In Sydney, the first speaker, Jenny Munro, a veteran Aboriginal activist, set the tone. "We need to understand the deep north and deep west of this country," she said. "The racism in the [Northern] Territory and in the west is in your face every day." She called for "an ongoing war we have to fight with rednecks." Munro declared: "It's a racist system, it's inherently oppressive to Aboriginal people."

Munro was followed by WAR's Ken Canning, who likewise framed the issue entirely as one confronting only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Canning, who was a lead Senate candidate for the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance at the July 2 federal election, demanded that "all institutions holding our children be investigated immediately."

Canning attributed the torture of the boys in the NT to a "racist" government, even though NT Chief Minister Giles, a vehement exponent of "law and order" politics, is himself Aboriginal. At the same time, Canning implied that non-indigenous people were to blame, declaring: "This country has to wake up to

itself.”

David Shoebridge, a Greens member of the New South Wales state parliament, was given the platform in order to boost illusions that a royal commission could recommend changes that would prevent violent abuses.

Shoebridge claimed that none of the “torture” conditions seen in the NT would have been possible if the recommendations of the 1991 royal commission into black deaths in custody had been implemented. In reality, that royal commission, established by the Hawke Labor government, served to defuse a growing working-class movement against the killings by police and prison guards, ensure that no prosecutions took place and strengthen the powers of the authorities, while adding a layer of indigenous officials and advisers to the police, prisons and courts.

The Greens MP described the abuses in the NT as “institutional failings,” as if they were aberrations in an otherwise healthy and legitimate “criminal justice system.” At that point, Shoebridge hastily ended his remarks, amid calls came from the audience of “what are you going to do about it?”

Paddy Gibson, a member of Solidarity, another pseudo-left group, called for the implementation of the 1997 “Bring the Children Home” report by the Australian Human Rights Commission, which recommended token official apologies and reparations for the decades-long removal of indigenous children from their families. “We need to make that a reality,” he declared. To achieve this goal, Gibson demagogically proposed a future march to “shut down the city and set the children free.”

In Melbourne, the speakers advocated black nationalism and included Les Thomas, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, who was introduced as a supporter of the “stolen generations” of Aboriginal children removed from their families. “I’ve been organising in the last 18 months with SOS Blak Australia in defence of communities,” he said. “I’ve grown up fighting racism in different forms from a young age.”

Thomas promoted the slogan “black lives matter,” which is being used in the US to depict the mounting numbers of police shootings of working class people as solely a question of race. He said: “The solutions need to go way beyond any recommendation put up by a

hand-picked panel and hand-picked judge and team of non-Aboriginal people. We cannot afford any more to have any non-Aboriginal people holding positions of power over Aboriginal people.”

This line dovetails with the elevation of a privileged layer of indigenous bureaucrats and business owners, personified by the likes of Adam Giles, into “positions of power.” It opposes the necessity for the only kind of struggle that can end the state violence—a unified struggle by the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, in Australia and internationally for the overturn of the capitalist profit system and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines.

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