

Australia: Police attack African youth at public housing estate

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An incident in inner-Melbourne last month, within days of the federal election, indicates that police attacks on young people and the whipping up of racism will continue unabated with Labor in office at both state and federal levels.

At 11 p.m. on November 28, in an apparent show of strength, more than 20 police officers assaulted and arrested young African-born residents, some as young as 14, in front of horrified parents and other people in the Flemington high-rise public housing estate.

Police arrested four teenagers, and have said they will be charged with indecent language. The police action began when two officers abused, assaulted and arrested Mubarak Moussa, an 18-year-old apprentice chef, who had just been dropped off by his employer after work that night.

Police accused him of throwing a rock at the police car in an earlier incident. They refused to listen to him or his employer, escalating the confrontation so that many residents, including older women and girls, came down from the flats to find out what was happening.

When Moussa's younger brother arrived, police sprayed him with capsicum gas. Several officers jumped on him and arrested him, along with two other boys. He told reporters: "One of the cops grabbed me and choke-slammed me to the floor.... They were pushing our faces to the ground and (had their) knees on us." The boys were unarmed and there had been no physical contact between them and the police before their arrest.

Moussa's employer, who did not want to be identified, told the media he had just dropped off his apprentice when the police falsely accused the young man of throwing a rock. "I thought it was just inflammatory from the beginning," he said. "There wasn't any mediation as such."

Mubarak Moussa told the WSW: "I was arrested in front of my flat. I got out of the car, closing the door. A policeman in uniform started calling me names.... I said I had just come home after work. They said they saw me crossing the road. My boss tried to get me away. My boss was told to back off or he would be arrested."

"About five officers jumped on my brother and two others. They are 14- and 16-year-old boys. The police cannot arrest kids like that—there were no adults with them when they were arrested. I was put in the divvy van and everyone came down. Ladies were screaming from their windows."

There were signs that the confrontation was planned, following a series of sensationalised media reports that African youth were menacing and robbing people on nearby city streets. As soon as people began to gather, police quickly arrived in 18 vehicles, newly equipped with head-mounted cameras.

Three weeks earlier, the police hierarchy had directed that vehicles be equipped with such cameras when conducting operations at the Flemington estate. Five extra officers were deployed from Moonee Ponds to boost local police numbers.

The day after the incident, the *Herald-Sun* ran highly distorted reports, quoting police claims of "a violent clash with African Flemington residents". This had been "a riot brewing for some time", it stated. The "mass brawl" had occurred as police "came under attack from up to 100 youths in Flemington." Without speaking to eye-witnesses, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that police had been "set upon by a group of more than 100 youths" while they were arresting someone for "throwing a rock at a police car".

Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby was quick to justify the police operation. "Any of this sort of gang activity, or group activity, or mob activity that is violent is totally anathema and totally unacceptable.... It is not part of the civilised way of life that we expect from our state and Australians more generally," he declared.

His language was indistinguishable from that employed by the Howard government's immigration minister Kevin Andrews, who fuelled a media campaign against African youth just before the federal election campaign. Andrews accused the African community of "failing to integrate or adjust into the Australian way of life". Without any evidence, he claimed that Africans were "over-represented in crime, the incidence of gangs and other undesirable

activities”.

As it had done repeatedly for a decade, the Howard government sought to encourage racist sentiment to divide working people and blame refugees and immigrants, in this case Africans, for the lack of decent jobs, deterioration of social services and worsening social inequality. Brumby’s comments confirm that Labor is just as willing to resort to scapegoating to divert attention away from its own responsibility for deteriorating living standards. The Rudd government has committed itself to retaining the cut in the refugee intake from Africa that was announced by Andrews.

Flemington estate of high-rise flats was built by the Housing Commission from 1962. Thousands of newly-arrived immigrant families have been housed on the estate over the past four decades, with African immigrants now comprising over a quarter of its 4,000 residents.

Many are refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia. Half are under 25 years of age. Somali is the most common language, spoken by 23.9 percent, although about half the Somali speakers were born in Australia. There were another 8.4 percent born in Ethiopia, 3.8 percent in Eritrea and 3 percent in Sudan.

On the estate, 52.6 percent of families are single-parent households, compared with a Victorian average of 15.4 percent. The median household income on the estate is \$298 per week, compared with nearby Moonee Valley, where it is \$1,066.

There are very limited community facilities, especially for young people. The Moonee Valley Council provides one youth centre, which remains open just three evenings a week—its weekend programs have been closed down. The upshot is that the area has become a ghetto-type environment in which police actions feature more and more prominently.

Over the years, police have claimed that the “incidence of graffiti, property damage and other anti-social behaviour” have reached “alarming proportions”. Since March 2006 there have been at least 19 official complaints against police victimisation. These include incidents of African youth being “punched and kneed”, punched while handcuffed, slapped and choked, forced to strip naked below the waist in public and subjected to unlawful searches.

The contemptuous official attitude toward these objections was displayed at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal in July when Victoria Police successfully defended its decision not to release an internal investigation report implicating two senior officers attached to Flemington station concerning complaints lodged by African youth.

Following the latest attack, African community leaders convened a meeting on December 1, which several hundred people from the estate attended, including dozens of teenagers determined to speak against the police actions.

Hostility toward the police was palpable from the outset. Angry young people, and some older residents, spoke about harassment by police virtually every day, and the futility of making formal complaints against the police. They raised many instances of police abuse, including racist insults, an attempt to question a 13-year-old child without an adult present, and officers refusing to give their names when requested.

The perspective of the organisers, however, was to allow only a token airing of complaints, and then form a committee to collaborate with the police. Meeting chairman Dr Berhan Ahmed attempted to cut off further accounts of police brutality and victimisation, but the meeting only became more heated. There was further anger when Ahmed urged young people to admit to throwing rocks at police.

When one teenager demanded that a community protest be organised outside Flemington police station, he received loud cheers. After the organisers refused to permit a vote on this call, most of the teenage boys walked out of the meeting, remaining in the park outside to continue expressing their frustration at the direction of the meeting. Finally, the meeting facilitator, a social worker, announced abruptly that yet another committee of young people would be set up and called for volunteers. No vote was taken.

Community leaders later sought a meeting with police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon. Ahmed told the *Herald-Sun* that the problems arose from a lack of “community policing”. “If there are bad people in the area, let’s work together and find out the problem,” Ahmed told the newspaper. Community policing, however, is not aimed at addressing the underlying social deprivation and lack of facilities, but at strengthening police operations in the area that will only continue the harassment and intimidation of youth that currently prevails on the estate.



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