

Young radicals have outgrown jail system

Asst June 22

PAUL MALEY
NATIONAL SECURITY EDITOR

Violent or radicalised juvenile offenders could soon be housed in a high-security containment centre after the union representing juvenile justice workers said its staff no longer had the tools necessary to contain disruptive or dangerous kids.

With the number of violent or radicalised young prisoners held in detention growing, the Public Service Association has initiated legal action in the Industrial Relations Commission to compel the Juvenile Justice Department to construct a specialised wing to house violent detainees. The action, initiated in February, followed what the union said was an escalating pattern of assaults against staff.

Julie Bond, an industrial officer for the PSA, said assaults against staff and careworkers had become commonplace and that she feared it was only a matter of time before someone "went home in a body-bag". "There's been a series of assaults over many, many months," Ms Bond told *The Australian*. "Last November we had an officer have a fire extinguisher nearly go through her head. She hasn't come back to work and I don't think she'll ever come back."

Ms Bond said the union was seeking urgently to have a customised, temporary facility built into the Baxter and Cobham Juvenile detention centres in NSW in lieu of a permanent facility to be built at some point into the future.

The Weekend Australian last Saturday revealed staff inside Cobham and Baxter detention

centres were struggling to manage a small number of radicalised detainees who have been charged with terrorism offences. Only four of the 287 detainees presently in juvenile detention have been charged or convicted for terrorism offences. But some of the boys have assumed leadership positions, and authorities — as well as police — are concerned they are recruiting other inmates.

Ms Bond emphasised staff were not calling for a SuperMax-style facility. Rather, they wanted a secure wing where violent or radicalised youths could be given all the support they need while keeping staff and other detainees safe.

"What we're finding is the kids might get written up, they might be segregation for a few hours but there are no long-term consequences," she said. Recent controversies surrounding youth detention in the Northern Territory had made it harder for staff to manage violent or disruptive youths. "The community and the politicians see them as children," she said. "Yes, they are children but we've got kids in there for murder, rape, you name it. People don't understand the volatility of these kids. There must be a better and safer control and to manage their behaviours."

Unlike adult jails, youth detention centres are focused primarily on rehabilitation. Security is more low-key and staff has fewer options for containing dangerous youths. Officers do not carry weapons. A spokeswoman for Juvenile Justice NSW said the agency was "committed to staff safety and will continue to work closely with the Public Service Association to meet the shared objective of making our workplaces safer".