Yet another police killing in Australia

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Police shot and killed a 30-year-old mentally disturbed man at point-blank range in Berkeley, a working class suburb of Wollongong, a steel city south of Sydney, on May 26. Paul Klein was the 37th victim of a police killing in Australia since 1990 and the eighth in the state of New South Wales state police in the past five years.

Klein's family has issued an impassioned plea for a full investigation into his death, with 'all necessary resources made available,' and for the media to allow the family the 'human decency' to bury their 'beloved son' in peace.

Klein was the second mentally-ill man killed by NSW police in 11 months. Roni Levi, 33, was surrounded and gunned down on Sydney's Bondi beach by police last June 28. Levi was threatening to kill himself after seeking medical help at St. Vincents Hospital the previous night.

Klein was also the second person killed in front of his family by police in Berkeley within six years. Boris Milenkovski, 49, an unemployed steelworker, was shot on August 6, 1992. No police officer has been charged over these deaths.

Klein was shot in the chest at 10.30pm after a siege by police and fire services at his grandmother's house. The shooting was recorded by local television stations and took place in full view of his mother and local residents. Described by neighbours as a quiet man, Klein had been diagnosed with mental problems, a fact that police would have known.

The tragedy took place after a disagreement between the victim and his mother and grandmother earlier that evening. Fire fighters and police were called after his grandmother and mother left the house at 9.30pm. When a fire broke out, the confused and distraught victim demanded police and firefighters leave the property.

Klein threatened to kill himself and began slashing his arms and chest with two knives. Firemen partially extinguished the fire but when it reignited and the heat intensified, Klein moved away from the house and towards the police. No attempts were made by the police to disarm or disable the man using long batons or high pressure fire hoses. He was shot in the chest at close range as he approached police and died minutes later on the way to Wollongong hospital.

The response by the government, the police and the media was designed to maintain the government's 'shoot-to-kill' guidelines for police in working class areas. The media provided blanket coverage, including television footage of the killing, combined with an outpouring of articles attempting to justify the killings as self-defence.

Leading police officials were given extensive air time to denounce civil liberties representatives as 'armchair critics' for suggesting that police could have shot Klein in the leg. Police Association secretary Peter Remfrey declared: 'To shoot him in the leg is not only unrealistic but ridiculous. When someone is coming at you with the intent to kill, you do not shoot him in the leg -- you shoot to kill.'

None of the media reports provided any information on the victim's mental health, social circumstances, family or any other details that may have explained his disturbed behaviour.

The state Labor government announced that the police would conduct their own inquiry, headed by South-East Region police commander Bruce Johnston from Wollongong. All such previous internal investigations have claimed the killings were justified or the result of inadequate training or lack of equipment.

A coronial inquest will be held but Police Minister Paul Whelan effectively preempted its findings by immediately defending the shooting. He said the shooting showed that policing 'is a very tough job'.

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Whelan pledged that all police would have yet another lethal weapon -- capsicum gas -- by July. This gas has already been introduced in the neighbouring state of Victoria under the pretext of reducing police shootings yet the killings have continued there. Moreover, American police have killed more than 60 people using capsicum gas.

The state government of Premier Bob Carr has been in the forefront of a law and order campaign, conducted by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike. As unemployment has increased in all working class districts the police have been armed with ever more weaponry and increased powers.

Under the Carr government's proposed new 'Police and Public Safety' laws, police will have wide-ranging powers to search, detain or arrest youth if they are suspected of carrying knives. Carr has already introduced laws allowing police to breakup gatherings of three or more youth, and pledged to increase police numbers.

This state build-up is combined with escalating cuts to mental health and other medical services. Thousands of mentally ill people are no longer receiving treatment because of the closure of scores of mental hospitals throughout Australia over the last 15 years. They are forced to rely on their families for care and assistance, or left to fend for themselves with tragic consequences. They account for almost one third of those killed by police in this period.

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