

"The police investigate the police and they are never prosecuted"

London march protests against deaths in custody

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Nearly 200 people marched on October 30 in protest against the deaths of more than 1,300 people in police custody since 1990. A petition was handed in to Number 10 Downing Street, the official London residence of Prime Minister Tony Blair, demanding a public inquiry. The march was organised by the United Families and Friends Campaign. Many present were relatives of those who have died, who blame the police for the fate of their loved ones.

The marchers called for the suspension of police and prison officers involved in any death in custody. They also demanded the scrapping of the Police Complaints Authority (PCA)—the internal police body that is supposed to investigate the police. The PCA is widely seen as nothing more than a cover-up for the police force they are supposed to investigate. Recently, it proposed some limited measures improving the care of those being held in police custody. These include: improved monitoring of sleeping prisoners, installing closed-circuit television in two cells per block to monitor vulnerable prisoners, and employing psychiatric nurses to advise custody officers.

Earlier in the year, Home Secretary Jack Straw had hinted that a public inquiry into deaths in police custody might be launched, but he has turned down the request for such an inquiry by the family of Brian Douglas—killed in 1995 after being hit by a police truncheon. A three-week inquest into Douglas's death said the police had been acting in self-defence and the Coroner recorded a verdict of misadventure.

The Home Office responded to the march by saying that the deaths in custody figures cited were "inflated", because 40 percent are linked to drink or drugs and 25 percent result from suicide.

World Socialist Web Site spoke to several of the relatives on the march.

Bernard Renwick, one of the leaders of the campaign, is the brother of Roger Sylvester, who died after being restrained outside his house in Tottenham by eight policemen in January this year. He said, "We see a definite pattern in all these deaths. Excessive force is used. The victims are blamed for their own deaths. The police investigate the police and they are never prosecuted.

"We are demanding that police officers are suspended until investigations are completed. Officers responsible for deaths should face criminal charges, even if they subsequently retire. All deaths in custody should be investigated independently. The Police Complaints Authority should be replaced by an independent body and police forces made accountable to the communities they serve. Legal Aid and full disclosure should be available to the relatives of victims. One of our main demands is to have a public inquiry into deaths in police custody."

Pauline Davies' brother, David, died in Brixton Prison. She told WSW, "David was in prison for non-payment of an £85 fine. He was meant to spend three days in Brixton prison. On his second day, he saw a doctor who put him on observation. The doctor, Dr. Alexander, prescribed David methadone although he was not a methadone addict. He didn't carry out any medical tests or check with his own GP [doctor].

"On the third day—the day he was due to be released—he was found dead in bed. We had Dr. Alexander struck off by the General Medical Council in February this year. Now we are asking for an inquiry into how this was allowed to happen, because there

were two other deaths in Brixton before my brother—Carl Owens, aged 22, and Kirk Sheen, aged 35—all in a five-month period. We are still waiting for a reply from Labour MP Paul Boateng. We've had no reply or comment from Brixton prison. Nothing has changed. We've been fighting for five years.”

Joann Bennett spoke about her brother Rocky Bennett. “Rocky had a mental health problem for about 18 years and was a patient in the Norvic Clinic. He died after being restrained by nurses on October 30, 1998. We are still waiting for an inquest. It is important to be in the United Families and Friends Campaign, in order that we have a united group of people who have been through similar experiences calling for something to be done about all these deaths. Parallels need to be drawn between the fact that black people get a rough deal in the psychiatric service, in the prison system and in police custody.

“The problem is we need policies and procedures and individuals need to be held responsible. You can't separate racism in the police force from broader racism in society. In the psychiatric service it is well established that black men are more likely to receive the harsher diagnosis of schizophrenia, higher doses of drugs and are more likely to be seen as dangerous.”

Tracey Alder is the cousin of Christopher Alder. “Christopher was arrested for ‘Breach of the Peace’. He went voluntarily in handcuffs into the back of a police van. It took about two or three minutes to drive to Humberside police station. By the time the van reached the police station, Christopher was unconscious.

“They said they thought he was asleep. They dragged him into the custody suite with his trousers and boxer shorts around his knees and left him lying on the floor face down for 10 minutes. There is a videotape, which shows all that took place in the custody suite. You can see him gasping for breath. He obviously looks in distress.

“Five officers were suspended and charged with quite a minor offence. We are awaiting a trial date, but the police are trying to put that off and insist we have an inquiry first. We still don't know why he lost consciousness in the first place. The police have lost the clothing he was wearing on the day he died. They are trying to push for an investigation of what happened in the custody suite and not what happened in the van.”

Christopher's sister Janet Alder said, “We want

justice for all the people who suffered unjustifiable deaths in police custody, psychiatric hospitals and prisons. This kind of thing cannot be tolerated any longer. There is so much distress and intimidation. You are made out to be in the wrong. I know that people in uniform have the same prejudices as normal human beings, but they are not vetted. The system protects them. They should be made responsible. We want the people to know what's going on. Whether you're black or white, you'll never know if or when you'll be in this position.”

Sally Lamb, the mother of Jamie Thomas, said, “Jamie committed suicide last November 28 in Winchester prison. Prison officers had discovered suicide notes 24 hours earlier, but didn't do anything. At the moment I'm a one-man band. I have been treated like dirt. I only received the internal investigation report last week and it is full of discrepancies.”



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