

Homeless man robbed, killed and set on fire in Sydney, Australia

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A 59-year-old homeless man was brutally murdered in the south-western Sydney suburb of Bankstown in the early hours of May 17. Aldo Flaiban, who suffered from schizophrenia, was beaten to death with a paving stone and robbed. His battered body was then set on fire as if it were so much garbage.

The cruel slaying shocked the shopkeepers and workers in Old Town Centre where Flaiban regularly slept in an arcade entrance. Most said they knew him as a harmless, polite and friendly man who had become a familiar figure in the area.

The murder attracted limited coverage in the local and national media, including a short editorial in the May 23 *Daily Telegraph*. As is usually the case, the editorial's most telling feature was its attempt to discourage any serious investigation into the social processes that led to the terrible killing.

Flaiban is portrayed in the article as someone who simply "fell through the webbing of the social safety nets and into the chaos of life on the streets" to become a "victim for those depraved social scavengers who prey on the most vulnerable and the weakest". It ends by proclaiming: "There is no point in seeking someone to blame—except all of us."

Blaming everyone in general for Flaiban's death is a convenient cover for those who are really responsible. His ultimate fate is the tragic human consequence of definite policies carried out over the past 15 years by successive Australian governments in the interests of big business and the wealthy. It was these policies that put in train the processes that eventually left Flaiban, and many more like him, vulnerable and unprotected on Sydney's streets.

Flaiban did not simply fall "through the webbing of social safety nets". Rather, by the time he fell—or rather was pushed—the safety nets had been largely dismantled and he no longer had any hope of leading a stable, productive and dignified existence.

Aldo Flaiban was born in Slovenia. He came to Australia with his family when he was six years old. Described by those who knew him as an intelligent man, he was apparently a talented artist, a competent mathematician and a skilled fitter and turner. Flaiban married sometime in the 1970s and he and his wife had one daughter. The family lived in the working class suburb of Punchbowl and later in Canley Vale, in

Sydney's west. Like many hundreds of workers in the area, both immigrant and native born, he worked as a tradesman in the State Rail railway workshops at Chullora only a few kilometres away. At one time well over 5,000 workers were employed in the various workshops in the Chullora complex.

While Flaiban had shown signs of mental illness as a young man, he was only later diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Given his condition, one can imagine that he would have regarded his steady job in Chullora as an important factor in enabling him to maintain a sense of stability and purpose and providing a framework for vital social interaction.

Toward the mid-1980s, life for Flaiban and his fellow workers began to drastically change. In line with the demands of business for the slashing of public spending and increased privatisation, the NSW state Labor government, headed by ex-union official Barrie Unsworth, stepped up moves to outsource rail maintenance and close state-run rail workshops. In 1987 Sydney's massive Eveleigh maintenance workshop was closed along with a number of workshops in the Chullora complex. The process continued under the Greiner Liberal government and the subsequent Carr Labor government, eventually resulting in the closure of every major rail maintenance workshop in NSW.

It was during this period that Flaiban's life began to unravel. His marriage failed and he lost his job in Chullora, most probably as a consequence of the downsizing that saw thousands of rail workers dumped on the unemployment scrapheap. It is not unreasonable to speculate that even before his dismissal, the ever-present fear of losing his job would have exacerbated Flaiban's mental condition and contributed to the marriage breakdown.

Unemployment was steadily increasing. A majority of the hundreds of middle-aged rail workers who had been made redundant found it extremely difficult to find a new job. For Flaiban, with his illness, it would have been virtually impossible. Without any means of supporting himself and with his home life destroyed, it was only a matter of time before Flaiban would wind up on the streets.

The outcome was made all the more inevitable because the vital services needed to assist those suffering from mental illness were being dismantled. In 1983, the NSW Labor

government commissioned an inquiry into health services for the mentally ill. The resulting Richmond Report recommended that sufferers would benefit from being integrated into the community and called for the closure of large dedicated mental institutions.

Rather than integration and the provision of adequately funded community-based support—including specialised and decent accommodation—existing facilities were shut down and the mentally ill virtually thrown onto the streets and left to fend for themselves. Decent accredited accommodation was scarce and many mentally ill people ended up in private rundown boarding houses where they were mistreated and exploited.

The drastic decline in mental health services in the 10-year period following the Richmond Report prepared the way for Flaiban becoming homeless and abandoned on the streets. A report produced by a Federal Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness (the Burdekin Inquiry) in 1993 referred to an acute shortage of psychiatric beds, the inadequacy of community-based services for the mentally ill and the “continuing degeneration of their care”.

The report also made the following important observation: “One of the biggest obstacles in the lives of people with mental illness is the lack of adequate, affordable and safe accommodation. Living with mental illness—or recovering from it—is difficult even in the best circumstances. Without a decent place to live it is virtually impossible.”

Yet despite the Burdekin Inquiry revelations, the nightmare situation for the mentally ill worsened—and continued under the Labor government led by Premier Bob Carr from 1996. A report from an inquiry by a NSW Health Department committee some eight years after the Burdekin Inquiry found that care for mentally ill people had deteriorated further because of the lack of psychiatric beds and funding for community assistance.

Had Aldo Flaiban been provided with the care he needed, including access to decent accommodation, counseling and other specialised assistance, he would be alive today, functioning as an active worker, friend, parent, grandparent.

One other aspect of the *Daily Telegraph* editorial needs to be dealt with, namely its reference to “depraved social scavengers who prey on the most vulnerable and the weakest”. Rather than providing any insight into the causes behind the tragedy of Aldo Flaiban, this sensationalist rhetoric avoids the obvious question: What type of society breeds such disregard for the life of a human being?

Flaiban’s killer or killers have not been apprehended, so it is not possible to discuss in any detail their particular social circumstances or psychological makeup. Nevertheless, certain points can be made. The murder took place in an area plagued by high unemployment, deteriorating social conditions and increasing levels of poverty. And, like Flaiban’s own predicament, this social crisis is no accident. It is the direct outcome of government policy.

The conditions in Bankstown, replicated in many working class areas throughout Australia, have created a volatile climate characterised by mounting frustrations and a deep sense of alienation. Whoever murdered Flaiban was most likely desperate and mentally unhinged themselves—a deranged product of crippling social disadvantage and endemic poverty. After all, Flaiban was robbed of what could not have been more than a few dollars.

The gruesome inhumanity of Flaiban’s killing is a metaphor for the way millions are treated in today’s society. The former tradesman was robbed and then disposed of. How many workers and young people in Sydney’s south-western suburbs are savagely exploited and then discarded as so much unwanted labour? And what conclusions do these people begin to draw about the value of their own, or anyone else’s, life?

Other influences are also at work. Flaiban’s slaying took place as the Australian government and the media were celebrating the slaughter of tens of thousands of men, women and children in the illegal and criminal war on Iraq. Throughout the previous weeks, the country’s television channels were replete with images of carnage, devastation and death. The authorities had no compunction about presenting mass murder and the brutal treatment of the Iraqi people as acceptable “collateral damage”.

The official denigration of the value of human life through the obscene glorification of war and militarism and the creation of unprecedented levels of social inequality and distress combine to create a debased society in which individual outrages and wanton acts of violence become an almost daily occurrence.

Yet those ultimately responsible for this state of affairs, and for Aldo Flaiban’s tragic death—the corporate and political elite—are not characterised in the media as “depraved social scavengers”. Instead, they are honored as pillars of the community and outstanding exemplary citizens.



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