

Two police killings underscore class tensions in New York City

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The unprovoked killings last month of two unarmed workers by police in New York City are symptomatic of both growing class tensions in the city and the increasing militarization of New York's police department as it wages its twin "wars" on terrorism and drugs.

While the mass media has lauded billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg for apologizing for one of the killings, declaring himself personally responsible, figures released by the city agency that receives complaints of police brutality indicate that the tragic incidents are not merely isolated accidents. Rather, they are the sharpest expression of intensifying police repression against the most oppressed layers of the city's population.

The first incident took place in the early morning hours of May 16, when a dozen police officers broke into the home of Alberta Spruill, a 57-year-old black woman, who was preparing to go to work. The cops, in full riot gear, broke down her door at 6:10 a.m. and threw a concussion grenade into her apartment. When detonated, these devices give off a loud bang and then a bright flash. They are designed to stun and deafen their victims. Despite the fact that Ms. Spruill was incapacitated by the blast and warned the police that she had a cardiac condition, the cops handcuffed her. Within two hours, she died from cardiac arrest.

The police were acting on a "tip" from a confidential informant who falsely claimed that there were drugs, guns, and attack dogs hidden inside her Harlem apartment. However, Ms. Spruill hardly fit the profile of someone involved in criminal activities. She had been a clerical worker for the city government for 29 years and had lived by herself in that apartment for nearly as long. On her days off, she did volunteer work with a neighborhood church.

The informant, a convicted drug dealer, had a long history of providing the police with false leads. Police never bothered to question his claim that he had used the

apartment for drug activities. If they had, they would have easily discovered that he had been in custody during the time when that he claimed he was inside the apartment. They spoke neither to neighbors nor the building's superintendent. Under the police department's rules, no corroboration of such "evidence" is required before enforcing a so-called "no knock" warrant with overwhelming and potentially deadly force.

The medical examiner has ruled Ms. Spruill's death a homicide. A spokesperson for the office said that the stress and fear of the raid caused her death.

Despite the gross violations of democratic rights and indifference to human life demonstrated in the paramilitary raid on the apartment of an innocent worker, Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly declared that the police were trying to "do the right thing" and that he did not believe that there had been an "inordinate number" of errors.

The second incident took place May 23. Ousmane Zongo, a 35-year-old immigrant from Burkina Faso, western Africa was repairing African art on the third floor of a storage room in the Chelsea section of Manhattan when police raided the building. Police officer Bryan Conroy fired his pistol at the art worker five times, hitting him four times in the abdomen, chest and arm. The victim died a few hours later. The raid by a total of eight officers was directed against a counterfeit CD operation allegedly operating out of the warehouse. Mr. Zongo was unarmed, had no criminal record, and had no relation whatsoever to the counterfeiting ring.

Officer Conroy, a member of the department since 2000, was in plainclothes, but wore a badge on a chain around his neck. For reasons unknown, the officer began chasing the immigrant worker through the halls of the building. Conroy claimed that Zongo attempted to grab his gun, compelling him to discharge his weapon. The United African Congress, a group representing African

immigrants, has reported that a witness to the killing has given an account completely at odds with that of the cop.

Mr. Zongo's friends have described him as a very gentle man, who spoke no English and avoided conflict. The medical examiner has not revealed how far away it estimates the two men were from each other when the bullets were fired.

The two incidents recall previous killings of innocent people by the New York police. In 1984, an officer shot and killed Eleanor Bumpurs, claiming that she was charging him with a knife. In 1994, a cop killed Anthony Baez with an illegal chokehold. In 1999, four plainclothes police shot and killed an unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, in a hail of 41 bullets in the vestibule of his Bronx apartment house. In 2000, undercover police attempting to conduct a "sting" operation against low-level drug dealers killed Patrick Dorismond, an innocent Haitian immigrant.

These latest killings, however, take place in a definite social and political context characterized above all by the mounting social inequality that is particularly sharp in New York City. It is estimated that more than 200,000 jobs have been lost in the city in the last two years since the bursting of the Wall Street bubble and the September 11, 2001 attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center towers.

In response to growing budget deficits, Mayor Bloomberg and New York Governor George Pataki have imposed a punishing package of cutbacks and tax and service fee hikes that are weighted heavily against New York City's working people and the poor.

Funds for basic social services such as children's welfare, the public school system, libraries and garbage collection are being cut, while 2,000 municipal workers have been laid off and thousands more city jobs are threatened. The city closed six firehouses last month.

In addition, workers are being forced to pay more on a wide variety of fees and taxes, including sales and property taxes. In two measures that hit low-wage workers particularly hard, transit fares have been increased by 33 percent—the largest hike ever—and sales tax has been reinstated for clothing purchases. Proposed increases are also planned for such things as water bills, cab fares, college tuition and rents in rent-controlled apartments.

The essential task of the city's police is that of defending a social order characterized by a yawning gap between the world's greatest concentration of multimillionaires, on the one hand, and, on the other, a

population in which nearly a third lives below the poverty line and 44 percent have no financial assets whatsoever. Increased killings and brutality constitute a reliable barometer of escalating class tensions.

The latest figures released by the city's Civilian Complaint Review Board show a 18.2 percent increase in complaints of police brutality in the first four months of this year compared to the same period in 2002. In a report released last week, the agency recorded 4,616 complaints last year, up 8.7 percent from the previous year and 12.3 percent from 2000.

Among the sharpest increases in complaints of police abuse included police forcing their way into homes and businesses, as in the case of the killing of Ms. Spruill. Those complaints have risen substantially from 466 in 1998 to 768 in 2002.

These police killings also take place in the context of the reconfiguration of the NYPD under the Patriot Act and other measures introduced under the Bush administration's "war on terrorism." The police department has been given a far wider latitude to infringe on civil liberties and use deadly force. The department remains largely untouched by the fiscal crisis. While other city employees have received pink slips, no cops are scheduled to be laid off.

New York has officially been on orange alert for a number of months, with a beefing up of police and military presence throughout the city. Indicative of the increasingly paramilitary character of the department, the mayor announced the appointment just before Memorial Day of a retired Army lieutenant colonel, Michael Sheehan, as the NYPD's deputy commissioner for the Counter Terrorism Bureau.

Mr. Sheehan's qualifications include his work as a counterinsurgency "adviser" in El Salvador during the mid-1980s, a period in which the US-backed dictatorship in that country massacred tens of thousands of workers and peasants.

Such appointments, combined with the constant drumbeat from the Bush administration that "we are at war," have only served to reinforce a military mindset in the NYPD that will undoubtedly produce more horrific deaths like those of Alberta Spruill and Ousmane Zongo.



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