

London: demonstration demands end to shoot-to-kill policy

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2 November 2005

Demonstrators protesting against deaths in police custody in central London on Saturday, October 29 called for an end to Britain's shoot-to-kill policy.

Speakers at the seventh annual United Families and Friends Campaign (UFFC) demonstration defied threats by the police to arrest anyone who used the organization's loudspeaker to address the several-hundred-strong crowd. Under this year's Serious Organised Crime and Police Act, anyone using a loudspeaker within one mile of Parliament faces a fine of up to £5,000.

Speaker after speaker addressed the crowd with their harrowing stories of state murder and cover-up. First to speak was UFFC chair Brenda Weinberg, whose brother Brian Douglas died in 1995 after reportedly being hit over the head with a police baton.

The Butler "Inquiry into Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision-making in relation to deaths in custody" raised concerns about the excessive use of the baton and the inquest verdict of misadventure, but no charges were ever brought against the officers involved.

Weinberg said the police wanted immunity from prosecution even in cases where inquest juries returned a verdict of unlawful death, such as happened with Harry Stanley and Roger Sylvester. Attorney General Lord Goldsmith has recently decided not to prosecute the police officers involved in the shooting of painter and decorator Harry Stanley in 1999 and a High Court judge last year quashed an inquest jury verdict of the unlawful killing of Sylvester whilst in police custody, also in 1999.

Brenda Weinberg told the demonstrators, "This year another incident occurred that exposed not only the police's ability to execute in cold blood but the government's acquiescence—that is the death of Jean Charles de Menezes."

Jean Charles's cousin, Alex Pereira, who carried the banner of the de Menezes campaign on the march, also called for an end to the shoot-to-kill policy. The cold-

blooded murder of Jean Charles de Menezes by armed officers on the London Underground on July 22 this year exposed for the first time publicly that a shoot-to-kill policy known as Operation Kratos had been established in secret two years earlier.

Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett recounted how she was unable to recognise her dead twin brother, Leon Patterson, because of 31 injuries it was alleged he received in police custody in Manchester in 1992. He had bruises covering his face, his nose had been sliced off and his kneecaps were bent out of shape. After 12 years of legal battles and an inquest verdict of unlawful killing, no police officer has been convicted.

Pauline Campbell, whose 18-year-old daughter Sarah died in Styal Prison in 2003, said that a succession of Labour ministers had done nothing to alleviate overcrowding and suicides in prison. She condemned the Labour Party's "much-hyped values" saying, "there appears to be no value attached to the sanctity of human life."

"Deaths in custody are part of a wider picture—a deeply worrying political malaise in which the government turns a blind eye to death at the hands of the state and where no one is accountable," she continued.

Janet Alder, whose brother died in police custody, told the demonstration, "The Crown Prosecution Service, Police Complaints Authority and the police are all part of the same system and look after themselves.... More and more people are dying at the hands of the state. There's no accountability."

Alder demanded to know why the three policemen that the CPS charged with "misconduct in public office" in relation to the death of her brother, Christopher Alder, in Hull police station in April 1998 had not been arrested and prosecuted. She described how her brother "was dragged with his trousers round his knees into the police station and left to die like a dog. Some policemen could

be heard laughing and making monkey-like noises in the background.”

The police fought for six years to stop the closed circuit TV footage of the events being released. Within weeks of it being shown on the BBC, the Humberside Police Authority approved the ill-health retirement of four of the officers, a well-worn escape route for policemen involved in disciplinary cases.

That the replacement for the CPS, the new Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), is just another mechanism for blocking real investigations of these injustices can be shown by its response. A press release said the IPCC was powerless to intervene in the decision, but hoped it could “rigorously pursue its aim to obtain their cooperation.”

Other speakers included Jean Elphick and Wally Coker, whose relatives have died this year. Sam Elphick, aged 17, was found hanging in his cell in the Hindley young offenders institution on September 16, 2005. He was the 28th child since 1990 to have hanged himself while in detention, but there has not been a single public inquiry into any of these deaths despite long struggles by campaigners. Paul Coker died after being restrained by police in London on August 6, 2005.

Irene Stanley, widow of Harry Stanley, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* and called for a campaign against the shoot-to-kill policy.

She had been involved in a “long, hard struggle” to hold accountable the policemen who had shot her husband, but it was “impossible to get any justice,” she said. Following the recent decision of the attorney general not to prosecute the officers involved, she explained how she had now “lost faith in the whole justice system.... Not that I had much faith in the first place.”

Irene pointed out, “The number of people who had died whilst in police custody had been building up over the last 30 years, even before the war on terrorism, and no one has ever been prosecuted.”

“People had expected Tony Blair to change things for the better when he got elected, but he has only made it worse. It has become a police state where we haven’t got any human rights. They have used the terrorism law to get away with anything they like and take us back to medieval times,” she added.

The UFFC was set up in 1997 by families and supporters in response to the deaths of their loved ones whilst in police custody. The families’ anger and frustration at the way all arms of the state thwarted their quest for justice led to their attempt to found an

organisation that rejected official politics.

Since then, it has grown to include the campaigns of many whose loved ones have died in custody, prison, young offenders institutions and police shootings on the street, with the de Menezes campaign being but one of the latest.

The de Menezes killing is also the latest expression of the unprecedented increase in the repressive powers of the state and attacks on democratic rights since Labour came to power in 1997.

In 1999, Home Secretary Jack Straw reneged on an earlier promise to hold an inquiry into deaths in police custody and refused to publish a report by the European Committee on the Prevention of Torture that criticised the way such cases were investigated.

In 2001, the Police Federation took out legal action in an attempt to prevent the screening of the film *Injustice* by Ken Fero, which documented deaths in police custody and became a catalyst for the formation of the UFFC.

Recently, the Metropolitan Police Federation’s chairman Glen Smyth made a sweeping attack on efforts to seek justice for police killings. He called for changes to the inquest system, stating that verdicts were not “reliable” and were “invariably preceded by campaigns that seek to prosecute police officers regardless of the evidence.”

In reality no officer has ever been prosecuted for a single one of the deaths in police custody. The latest IPCC report shows that the number of people who died in “contact with the police” in 2003-2004 was 100—up from 57 in 1996-1997, the year before Labour came to power. The prison population has also increased dramatically in the same period—by 40 percent, from 55,281 in 1996 to 77,749 in October this year. The number of prison suicides has nearly doubled from 64 to 95. The number of children in penal custody has risen from 3,130 in October 2004 to 3,423 in September 2005, an increase of 10 percent in a year.



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