

Louisiana, US: Death of man tased nine times by police ruled homicide

Hiram Lee
25 July 2008

A Louisiana coroner has ruled the January 2008 death of 21-year-old Baron Pikes at the hands of police was a homicide. Pikes, a sawmill worker from Winnfield, Louisiana, was killed while in police custody on January 17 after being shot nine times with a Taser gun.

Wanted on charges of drug possession, Pikes was approached by police, including Officer Scott Nugent, near a Winnfield grocery store on January 17. Police claim Pikes did not stop for them and a brief chase on foot ensued. Phillip Terry, an attorney representing Officer Nugent, has said his client caught up with Pikes and fought with him on the ground without help from his partner who “had just come back to the police department from triple bypass surgery and could not assist Officer Nugent.” Terrell says Nugent only resorted to firing his Taser when he had already exhausted “every means possible” to take Pikes into custody.

Dr. Randolph Williams, coroner for Winn Parish, has challenged the official story saying Pikes was already handcuffed when Nugent fired the first shot with his Taser. Additionally, Williams’s findings reveal that Pikes was struck with six 50,000-volt shocks at the arrest site within a period of three minutes. Following this rapid succession of electroshocks, Pikes was placed in a patrol car and driven to the police station. Once there, Pikes was tased again while seated in the back of the patrol car, taking the seventh shot directly to his chest.

Dr. Williams told CNN in a recent interview that following the seventh shock, “[Pikes] was pulled out of the car onto the concrete. He was electroshocked two more times, which two officers noted that he had no neuromuscular response to those last two 50,000-volt electroshocks.” Williams says Pikes may already have been dead when the last two shots were fired. Police

carried Pikes’ body into the station before calling an ambulance.

Dr. Williams, who has been extremely vocal in his criticism of the police, found that the use of Tasers in the incident that led to Pikes’ death “violated every aspect—every single aspect—of the department’s policy about its use.”

While no decision has yet been made as to whether Officer Nugent will face criminal charges for his actions, the officer has been fired by the City Council since the January incident. While Nugent apparently had a clean record, it has been revealed that of the 14 times Tasers have been used by Winnfield police since officers received them last year, 10 involved Nugent. A testament to racial tensions in the small town, no less than 12 of those 14 incidents involved black suspects.

The death of Baron Pikes, who was black, at the hands of Officer Nugent, who is white, has ignited the already tense racial situation in Winnfield, leading to angry protests. In a strange and tragic coincidence, Baron Pikes was the first cousin of Mychal Bell, one of the defendants in the infamous “Jena Six” case, which saw six black high school students from Jena, Louisiana fall victim to a racist prosecution for the schoolyard confrontation with a white classmate. Winnfield is just 40 miles northwest of Jena.

An earlier victim of Nugent’s tasing was a black teenager who had snuck out of his house to meet a girl. “I asked the police to bring him home,” the boy’s father is quoted as saying in the *Chicago Tribune*, “and they did, but in pieces—he was all scraped up and bruised. They told me the next time he runs, ‘You know we’re going to shoot him.’”

The immediate context in which Nugent was allowed to work and ultimately to kill Baron Pikes is one of severe corruption. Officer Nugent’s own father was

Gleason Nugent, the former chief of police in Winnfield who killed himself in 2005 after charges of voter fraud were made in connection with his run for election to that office. Officer Nugent has also been described as a protégé of the current chief of police, Johnny Ray Carpenter, who was a convicted drug offender who had the privilege of being pardoned by former Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards. Edwards is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for racketeering.

A picture emerges of a town with a small, criminal elite resorting to brutal violence to intimidate an increasingly resentful and resistant population. It is a sharp expression of broader tensions throughout the country.

The use of tasers, in particular, has begun to play an important role in police intimidation. Incidents similar to those that have taken place in Winnfield, Louisiana have become all too common. Perhaps gaining the most attention was the September 2007 tasing of Andrew Meyer, a journalism student at the University of Florida who was tased after he attempted to ask questions critical of Democratic Senator John Kerry during a public forum. Senator Kerry did nothing to stop the assault on the student.

While that incident did not lead to the death of the tasing victim, there are more than enough examples of the deadliness of this supposedly non-lethal device. In March 2008, Walter E. Haake Jr., a 59-year-old worker at a Topeka, Kansas Goodyear plant, died after being tased by police in the plant's parking lot when he refused to leave his car. The police had been called when fellow Goodyear workers became concerned over Haake's welfare due to a fall which may have left him with a head injury causing him to become disoriented.

Forty-seven-year-old Russell Walker died after being tased by police in Las Vegas. Arrested for creating a disturbance at a hotel, Walker was tased first when he struggled with officers and again after being handcuffed. Placed on a gurney, Walker was tased a third time, after which he stopped breathing. A grand jury found the actions of police officers in this case justified.

Patrick Lee of Nashville, Tennessee, under the influence of marijuana and LSD, was tased 19 times by police after he was thrown out of a local nightclub. He died two days later. Ronald Hasse, 54, of Chicago, was

fighting with police when he was tased two times. One of the electric shocks is reported to have lasted 57 seconds. He died as a result of the electrocution, according to medical examiner reports.

The list of taser-related deaths is a long one, containing more than its share of brutal detail. A 2006 report by Amnesty International found 152 deaths in all since 2001 involving the use of tasers. The United Nations has also condemned the use of tasers, classifying them as "a form of torture that can kill." They are used in roughly 7,000 police departments in the United States.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact