

Australia: Man dies after being tasered by police

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A pathologist's report has revealed that on June 12 in the small town of Brandon in northern Queensland, 39-year-old Antonio Galeano was tasered up to 28 times by police before he died in custody 10 minutes later.

Two officers, one senior and one junior, were responding to a call that Galeano was damaging property at his partner's house. They sprayed Galeano with capsicum gas and opened fire with a stun gun, allegedly because he was threatening them and himself with a metal pole and a piece of broken glass.

The clearly upset Galeano had been discharged just hours earlier from the region's Townsville Hospital. Police had taken him to the hospital two days earlier for a mental health assessment as a suicide risk after reporting that he had evaded them by running through traffic and been found lying on railway tracks.

Galeano's release from hospital after such a brief stay points to the impact of the long-running deterioration of psychiatric services in the public health system in Queensland and other states.

Initial claims by police—before any investigation had begun—that Galeano had been tasered “two to three times” were revealed to be false. Data from the gun recorded 28 separate shots, each lasting five seconds, in less than two minutes. A post-mortem revealed that Galeano died as the result of a heart attack.

An eyewitness described how she had pleaded with police to stop firing at Galeano as he was crying out in agony and obviously in pain from the shocks. “They

were electrocuting him, he was screaming in pain. It looked like someone had a bolt of lightning and [it was] hitting him and taking every last bit of life out of him.”

Police have continued to try to divert blame away from the officers involved in Galeano's death. Queensland Deputy Police Commissioner Ian Stewart claimed that the gun was malfunctioning and that the 28 cycle-reading was incorrect. Queensland Police Union acting president Ian Leavers declared that he was “baffled” by the information and simply could not understand the figures.

These are threadbare arguments to support weapons known to be responsible for a growing list of deaths around the world. A 2008 Amnesty International report found that 334 people had been killed by police tasered since 2001 in the United States alone. In Canada, an inquiry into the 2007 police killing of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski at Vancouver Airport has revealed that Dziekanski's death was not only unnecessary but that he was tasered five times in just over 30 seconds (See: “Canada: Cover-up of RCMP murder of immigrant worker unravels”).

Galeano is the third person in Australia to die after tasered. In May 2002, Gary Pearce of New South Wales was shot with a taser during a police raid on his house. Pearce, who was also suffering from a mental illness, died 17 days later from a heart attack. Just two months ago, an unarmed 39-year-old man from Alice Springs was tasered, only to die in hospital later that night.

Tasers operate in two modes. In “probe mode,” which was used against Galeano, the taser fires a dart

into a person which is then manually triggered to deliver 19 electric pulses per second, totalling about 1,300 volts for 5 seconds. This mode is used to force someone onto the ground through muscle spasms. In “stun-drive mode,” the taser creates an arc of 50,000 volts that is then pushed against the target’s body at close range, causing excruciating pain.

Queensland Police Minister Neil Roberts has convened an internal inquiry—a joint Crime and Misconduct Commission and police ethical standards command investigation—into Galeano’s death. In the meantime, 1,200 tasers will remain in use across the state. Roberts merely temporarily suspended the rollout of a further 800. The investigation will not review the basic issue of using tasers—only the police protocols, which currently place no limit on the amount of times a taser can be fired at a target, as well as officer training and monitoring of taser use.

In neighbouring NSW, the Labor government has 229 tasers deployed and is planning a statewide rollout to all frontline police, starting next month. The rollout will cost \$10 million and take 18 months to complete. Victoria’s Labor government is not planning to introduce tasers according to police Chief Commissioner Simon Overland in an interview with the *Sunday Herald Sun* on June 6. Instead, all Victorian police will be armed with a more powerful .40 caliber semi-automatic pistol.

Increasingly, tasers are being used for “law and order” purposes. Last year, Queensland police used tasers against a 16-year-old girl who refused orders to move on, because she was waiting for an ambulance for a sick friend.

Tasers are just the latest weaponry handed to the police in recent decades, under conditions where paramilitary riot and “public order” squads and special operations units already have arsenals of machine guns, armoured personnel carriers, heavy batons, water cannons and gas-canister equipment.

The spreading police use of tasers will not be confined to criminal cases. An incident in 2007 in the United States at a forum held by former presidential

candidate John Kerry at the University of Florida already points to their use to silence political opposition.

The student, Andrew Meyer, asked Kerry why he and the Democratic Party refused to pursue charges of voter fraud in the 2004 elections, impeach President George W. Bush or oppose preparations for war with Iran. Six police officers dragged him to the back of the auditorium, tasered him and arrested him for supposedly “inciting a riot” (See: “ISSE condemns police assault on University of Florida student”).



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