Quebec's Villanueva inquest: Whitewashing a police killing

Our reporter
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On August 9, 2008, 18-year old Fredy Villanueva was shot and killed by police in the working-class district of Montreal-North, as he protested the arrest of his brother. The next day, a spontaneous demonstration against police brutality degenerated into a riot. (See: Canadian media covers up the social roots of the Montreal riot)

Initial testimony at a coroner's inquest into Villanueva's death—an inquest that was established only after intense public pressure and repeated protests—has revealed that a police and media disinformation campaign was launched immediately after the shooting so as to whitewash the actions of the police.

The inquest has shown that the Montreal Police put out a false version of the events of August 9, 2008, and that this story was accepted and rebroadcast as good coin by the media without any serious attempt to ascertain what had really happened.

Immediately after the death of Fredy Villanueva, the police claimed that the two officers involved in his shooting had been "surrounded, thrown to the ground and strangled" by a mob of youths and had fired in self-defence. According to the recent testimony of Bruno Duchesne, principal investigator for the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP) into Villanueva's killing, this version was untrue.

In his testimony at the inquest, Duchesne stated in spite of the fact that QPP investigators had questioned one hundred and eleven people, it had found not a single witness who saw the two cops being "surrounded, thrown to the ground and strangled." Duchesne's testimony gives the lie to statements echoing the police's claims that appeared far and wide in the media in the days immediately following the shooting of Villanueva. For example on August 11 *La presse* reported, "Passers-by who saw the scene affirm that one of the youths had seized a police officer's neck."

A medical report also shows no marks of strangulation about the neck of either of the two police implicated in the death of Villanueva, Jean-Loup Lapointe and Stephanie Pilotte.

Another key question raised by the first days of the inquest is that the two police officers were not immediately segregated after the shooting—a direct contravention of police procedure when a civilian is killed by a cop

The internal document of the *Service de police de la Ville de Montréal* (the Montreal police force) that outlines the rules that govern cases involving a killing by police states that the local police supervisor "must isolate the policeman who is involved" and ensure that "no-one enters into contact" with the civilian and police witnesses. However the officers involved, Lapointe and Pilotte, were driven back together to the Montreal North police station and then to Notre-Dame Hospital, where they met with an official from the Montreal Police Brotherhood (the police union).

In stark contrast, all the other witnesses were isolated in order to prevent them adjusting their stories to match one another. The police's isolation procedure was thus applied to the civilians, but not to the police. The two other people shot along with Villanueva were kept segregated and questioned while they were still in hospital. Jeffrey Sagor Metellus, shot in the back by police, was interrogated from his hospital bed while still under sedation. Denis Meas, hit in the shoulder, was charged with assault while on his hospital bed.

The Montreal Police's procedures document further stipulate that the police officers involved must remain available to collaborate in any internal police enquiry.

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But in this case, neither of the two police was ever questioned by the QPP.

The QPP did not bother to interview officer Pilotte, instead accepting a written report she submitted one week later. Officer Lapointe, who opened fire and shot the youth, was not considered a suspect until after Pilotte had submitted her report on August 15, 2008. Lapointe, defying official Montreal police procedure, then invoked his right to remain silent and turned in a written report, no doubt drawn up with the help of Montreal Police Brotherhood lawyers, one month later.

In his testimony at the coroner's inquest, QPP investigator Duchesne defended his decision not to interrogate the officers, stating that he needed to gather the greatest number of facts prior to interrogating them. He also claimed that had he questioned the police officers he would have had to read them their rights and that this might have gotten in the way of his investigation.

Jean-Paul Brodeur, a professor of criminology at the University of Montreal, says that he has "never encountered a single case where police have refused to meet with witnesses in an incident. In general, they are questioned very promptly... The witnesses are met with precisely to be certain of the facts."

To explain away the fact that he did not follow the most elementary police procedures and rules, Duchesne testified that he believed in the honesty of police officers and felt confident he could rely on their written reports. He also stated that this was his first time as Chief Investigator in an investigation into the actions of another police force and that he had never read the Montreal police's rules. Duchesne's bogus excuses are a convenient way to hide what really happened and to protect the police implicated in the death of Villanueva.

These police practices reveal the methods of the police in dealing with the population, especially in poor working-class immigrant neighbourhoods, and the support these methods receive from the government, the opposition parties and the media.

Since the ruling elite has for decades carried out the destruction of social infrastructure and services to the population, it increasingly turns to repression as a "solution" to social tensions. Growing social tension and increasing alienation from the establishment are the inevitable results of the desperate situation in which a large section of the population, especially the youth, finds itself.

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