

More deaths at the hands of UK police

Robert Stevens
31 August 2011

In the space of just seven days, three more people have been killed in police operations in the UK involving the use of lethal Taser guns and pepper spray.

On August 16 eight police officers came to arrest Dale Burns in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, a 27-year-old father of two young children. (See “British police kill unarmed man with Taser”).

During the arrest an officer discharged a Taser device three times, and another used pepper spray. Following the arrest, Burns, a body-builder, complained of feeling unwell and was taken to Furness General Hospital where his condition deteriorated. At around 9 PM he was pronounced dead.

On August 22, Jacob Michael, a 25-year-old man from Widnes, Merseyside was at his home when police arrived at around 5.15 PM. Officers used pepper spray on Michael and then subdued him with massive force, inflicted by up to 11 police officers. Following this attack he was taken into custody and rapidly became unwell. Later that evening he was taken to hospital where he was pronounced dead.

The following night Great Manchester Police officers used a Taser on Philip Hulmes, a 53-year-old truck driver from Bolton. The police claim that Hulmes had begun stabbing himself in the stomach when they broke into his house. After using a Taser on Hulmes, he was taken to the Royal Bolton Hospital where he died about half an hour later.

Taser guns are deadly weapons and deliver a 50,000-volt electric charge through two dart-like electrodes that remain attached to the gun by 21-foot-long insulated wires, enabling the handler to administer repeated shocks. The victim experiences an excruciatingly painful five-second cycle that causes neuromuscular incapacitation—the disruption of brain control over the muscles of the body.

Tasers were introduced into Britain in 2004 and were used by 10 police forces in trials. Since 2008 they have been available for use by all police forces in England and Wales. Tasers have been in widespread use in the United States since 2001. Since then, more than 460 people have died in the US after being hit by a Taser, according to Amnesty International.

Until the death of Dale Burns, no deaths had been

officially attributed to Taser use in the UK. In 2006, however, 47-year-old Brian Loan died several days after being shot with a Taser in County Durham. His death was recorded as attributable to heart disease and not the Taser attack.

Another death not recorded as caused by a police Taser attack was that of Raul Moat in July last year. Moat had been hunted down by police in a week-long manhunt and, following a six hour standoff, he supposedly killed himself. But immediately prior to this police are believed to have fired two Taser shots at Moat. These possibly resulted in a muscle spasm, causing him to involuntarily pull the trigger of the shotgun pointing at his head.

One eyewitness account strongly suggests that overwhelming and potentially lethal force was used by the police immediately prior to Jacob Michael's death. There are also unanswered questions as to what the police were doing in his house. An article in the *Liverpool Echo* on August 27 states that, according to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, who are investigating the death, the police received an emergency 999 call that cut off without anyone saying anything. Police then traced the call to Michael's address.

This is flatly contradicted by a neighbour of Michael, Ann Blease, who told the *Daily Mail*, “His mum told me Jake [Jacob Michael] was the one who rang the police himself, saying that someone was threatening him with a gun.”

According to her eyewitness account, Michael was attacked by up to 11 police officers who punched and kicked him while he was on the ground. She said, “What the police did was outrageous. He was handcuffed, on the floor with his legs restrained and they didn't even have the decency to pull up his pants.

“They seemed to be kneeing him in the back of the head. I counted 11 cops. They were all sat on him, giving him a kicking and giving him side digs. There was one woman officer, the rest were men, and she was getting her kicks in as well.”

The *Mail* report claims that the “police said they were arresting him on suspicion of affray but there was a struggle and Michael was blasted in the face with the spray.

“Despite him being temporarily blinded by the effects, Michael managed to run out of the house and got to a grass verge before being tackled and brought to the ground by other police officers who were waiting nearby.”

Ann Blease described how Michael was then brutally set upon:

“They were chasing him in the street. I saw it because they chased him in front of my house.

“They started chasing him and hitting him in the back of the legs with batons. They said, ‘Why don’t you stand up and give yourself some dignity’, to him. But he couldn’t even stand up after they’d hit him with the batons.”

She continued, “They had banged his head on the floor and they were giving him punches. He was already handcuffed and he was restrained when I saw him. I don’t know what happened in the house, I just saw when they were on the street.

“He was shouting, ‘Help me, help me’. He wasn’t coherent. I don’t know why they were bringing him in for affray. It doesn’t matter, he didn’t deserve that.”

Following his harrowing ordeal, Michael was bundled into a police van and taken into custody at Runcorn police station in Cheshire. According to reports, he was so ill that paramedics had to be called. Michael was then taken to Warrington General Hospital by ambulance, where he was pronounced dead.

An initial post-mortem carried out on August 23 failed to establish the cause of Michael’s death. Michael was a fit, amateur rugby player.

In the case of Hulmes’ death, the *Guardian* reports, “It is thought a concerned relative called police to the house at 8.30pm. Police were told that Hulmes, who was armed with a knife, had locked himself in, was making threats and had begun to stab himself.

“Officers arrived and smashed a hole in the door. When they spotted his injuries they called for Taser-trained back up. After further failed attempts to talk him out of the building they broke in and used the stun gun.”

If this is true, then why did the police use a Taser, imposing unbearable pain on a man already apparently seriously injured and in severe distress?

The IPCC, despite its name, is in no way independent of the police. Ignoring the many unanswered questions surrounding Hulmes’ demise, the IPCC released a one paragraph statement on August 25, just two days after the latter’s death. Saying it had “now assessed information available following his death”, it added, “We have decided there is no requirement for an IPCC investigation into the police action.”

It said that a post mortem found, “that the man died from stab wounds sustained prior to the police arriving” at his

address.

This is not the first time IPCC has exonerated the police following a death where a Taser was used. Last year, the IPCC exonerated Nottinghamshire police for an incident in June 2009 in which several of its officers subdued a man in the city centre while one used a Taser on him three times and another officer appeared to repeatedly punch the victim in the neck and head area.

The use of Tasers by England and Wales’ 43 constabularies has increased exponentially over the recent period, and they are increasingly the weapon of choice. Home Office statistics reveal that Tasers were deployed 1,279 times over a three-month period between January and March 2010, compared to 594 times between April and June 2009.

Following the three deaths, the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) representing police chiefs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, has refused to hold a review into their use. Acpo in Scotland also said it had no plans to review the use of Tasers or pepper spray by police.

Commenting on the deaths, campaign group Inquest noted that there had already been five deaths in circumstances that involved police use of force excluding firearms this year, compared with four throughout 2010.

Inquest found that between 1997 and 2007 there were over 530 deaths in police custody in England and Wales. Not a single police officer has been convicted in connection with these deaths. Many of these were the result of police gunfire.

From 1990 to 2011, police shot dead 53 people; 21 of the killings having been committed by London’s Metropolitan Police. The latest fatality at the hands of the Met was Mark Duggan, the 29-year-old father of four who was executed by police officers on August 4 in Tottenham, an event that triggered the recent widespread disturbances in London and other cities and towns nationwide.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact