

Taser death in Australia: A warning to youth

The International Students for Social Equality
29 March 2012

The International Students for Social Equality condemns the police killing of Roberto Laudisio Curti in Sydney's CBD on March 18. The young Brazilian student was chased, capsicum sprayed and repeatedly Tasered by six police officers, who were apparently looking for someone who had stolen a packet of biscuits. He posed no threat to police or others and committed no crime.

Young people in Australia, Brazil and around the world are rightly disgusted over the police actions and Laudisio Curti's tragic death. But the response of the Australian authorities indicates that there will be no justice for the Brazilian student. New South Wales Premier Barry O'Farrell immediately defended the police and confirmed the continued use of potentially lethal Tasers.

State and federal governments have cynically expressed sympathy for Laudisio Curti's family and made attempts to placate the Brazilian government. But the "full and independent" investigation of the death has been left in the hands of the police and, as in the case of past police killings, will be a whitewash.

The ISSE warns that Laudisio Curti's death is not an isolated incident, but is another symptom of the build-up of the police apparatus in NSW and across Australia, aimed particularly against young people. Governments routinely resort to right-wing law-and-order rhetoric to ramp up police numbers which have increased Australia-wide from almost 44,000 in 2004 to about 50,000 in 2011. NSW has the largest force with 15,900 police.

Following youth riots in Sydney's Redfern and Macquarie Fields in 2004 and 2005, the then NSW Labor government further strengthened the police

force. It created a specialist Public Order and Riot Squad equipped with the full range of body armour and weaponry. The squad, which was used during the massive police presence for the 2007 Sydney APEC summit, has been increasingly deployed for protests and at night on Sydney streets.

In Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, Chief Commissioner Ken Lay announced in February that the riot squad would be more than doubled from 50 to 110 and an additional 400 frontline police officers deployed by June. Lay told the *Age* newspaper that the additional police were needed to deal with "kids' parties," involving hundreds of young people, that required a rapid response and "a very aggressive approach."

The widespread use of Tasers is part of this strengthening of police forces. This weapon was first introduced as a supposed non-lethal alternative following a wave of police shootings and deaths. The deployment of Tasers—currently numbering 7,000 nationally—is no longer limited to specially trained units. As the latest incident exposes, police use Tasers in situations that pose no threat of violence.

Laudisio Curti's death brings the number of Taser deaths nationally to five. According to an Amnesty International report in February, there have been more than 500 deaths in the United States. Yet plans are being made for more extensive use. In Victoria, preparations are being made to roll out dual cartridge Tasers—that is, weapons capable of firing two high-voltage shocks without reloading.

This police build up is intersecting with growing fears in ruling circles about the potential for social and political unrest as the worsening global economic crisis

impacts on the Australian economy. Concerns have been voiced over the youth riots that erupted in working class areas of Britain over the police killing of Mark Duggan last August.

Australian Federal Police chief Tony Negus warned last September about “communities who are feeling somewhat left out” and young people “who are feeling disassociated with what’s happening in a broader sense.” He said he had spoken personally to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who had shown “a great interest” and that the AFP was contributing to a “whole of government response” to prevent youth unrest.

Negus and others are well aware of the frustration and anger building up among young people over the lack of any future. After leaving school, only one third find full-time work or study by May of the following year. Youth unemployment stands officially at 16 percent, treble the national average, and over half of young people in work have unstable casual positions. Conditions for students are just as bad. More than half of all full-time tertiary students are forced to work.

Australian police are drawing lessons from the British government’s repressive police-state response to the youth unrest. Victorian chief commissioner Lay told the *Age*: “[The England riots] caused me to question what our response was, what our response would be if we had a similar incident... I certainly thought that there was room to make us better.”

The Occupy protests last year provided governments and police with a testing ground. In Melbourne, the riot squad, dog squad, mounted police, Critical Incident Response Unit and plainclothes officers were all used to violently shut down the protest. Demonstrators were punched, kicked and capsicum sprayed. At least 95 were arrested and one was taken to hospital.

The political establishment is clearly preparing the state apparatus for a confrontation with the working class. It regards youth in particular as a threat to the present social order. The ruling elites will not hesitate to use the full force of the state to suppress a social and political upheaval.

Young people should draw the necessary conclusions and prepare accordingly. The police build-up has been supported across the political spectrum, from the Liberal-National coalition to Labor and the Greens. This means that youth have to turn to the construction of a new leadership based on the working class and a socialist perspective aimed at abolishing the present bankrupt social order. This is the perspective fought for by the ISSE and the Socialist Equality Party.

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