

Australian police Taser attack kills Brazilian student

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Visiting Brazilian student Roberto Laudisio Curti, aged just 21, died early on Sunday morning in the heart of Sydney after six police officers chased him and forced him to the ground, reportedly firing Taser stun guns at least three times. Police also admitted using capsicum spray.

All the evidence indicates that police used potentially lethal force against an innocent young man, leading directly to his death, for no other reason that he supposedly failed to cooperate with police demands. From what is known, there was no justification for what happened to him. Laudisio Curti had committed no offence—except for a suspected theft of a packet of biscuits—was unarmed and posed no threat to anyone. Yet, he was set upon by six police, assaulted, sprayed and Tasered until he was motionless.

His tragic death bears some similarities to the British police killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, another Brazilian, who was shot on the London Tube in 2005 by officers who claimed to wrongly suspect he was a terrorist about to detonate a bomb. In the case of Laudisio Curti, however, there was no claim of an impending threat of violence.

An unnamed police source told the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* that the Taser use was justified because Laudisio Curti had been uncooperative and had resisted arrest. “He was Tasered a number of times over a reasonable amount of time but he just kept going and was able to shove officers away.”

Laudisio Curti’s family and Brazilian authorities have demanded answers. “He just went out for fun like any other young male on Saturday night and that happened to him, so the family cannot understand it all,” Andre Costa, the Brazilian consul in Sydney, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Police claimed to have received reports of a man taking a packet of biscuits from a convenience store in Sydney’s CBD at about 5 a.m. on Sunday. Within half an hour, police targeted Laudisio Curti in the same area, but it remains unclear whether he was the man involved in the alleged robbery.

An eyewitness told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Laudisio Curti, shirtless, was running “as best he could” from police. Police then tackled him to the ground. “He was struggling ... there was a lot of physical involvement from the police. He was on the ground already and they were holding him down... At one point I heard him scream out, ‘Help me,’ and he kept screaming and was trying to fight back.” After three to four Taser shots, he had stopped screaming.

Another eyewitness told the *Daily Telegraph* that Laudisio Curti was Tasered “at least three times” in succession. Each time he fell, rose to his feet, was Tasered and fell again.

Chilling CCTV footage, now uploaded to YouTube, shows six officers chasing Laudisio Curti past a café window. One officer attempted to grab him by the throat and shoulders, but he broke free and ran out of the frame. At this point, an officer raised his Taser as the others closed in on Laudisio Curti.

The young man’s friends have started a website calling for a protest at the Australian consulate in Sao Paulo: “In solidarity with our friend Roberto Laudisio, killed by police in Australia, for an apparent robbery of a packet of biscuits... We suggest we all take a pack of biscuits and leave them on the door of the consulate.”

The New South Wales police force has launched a “critical incident investigation.” In effect, this means the police will investigate themselves. Even before that inquiry began, Acting Police Commissioner Alan Clarke played down the role of Tasers in the student’s death. “I think it is very presumptuous for anyone to determine the cause of death is a Taser simply because it’s occurred in an incident where a Taser has been utilised,” he stated.

NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell swiftly backed the continued use of Tasers, not bothering to wait for any official inquiries to be conducted by a coroner and the state Ombudsman. Likewise, an editorial in today’s *Sydney Morning Herald*, despite lip service to the “serious concern” raised by the witness accounts, insisted that police must carry Tasers as a “non-lethal option for dealing with violent opponents.”

In reality, Tasers are known to be potentially fatal. They have been responsible for more than 500 deaths in the US during the past decade according to a February report from Amnesty International. Moreover, there was no evidence to suggest that Laudisio Curti presented any danger to the police officers chasing him, or anyone else.

Laudisio Curti’s death, the fifth Taser-related death in Australia since 2002, raises disturbing questions about the increasing level of police violence. Since Tasers were rolled out by the previous Labor government in NSW, 1,272 state police officers have been equipped with them. Across the country, state and federal police have been armed with more than 7,000 Tasers.

The weapons were first introduced in Australia following a wave of 69 police shootings from 1984 to 1995, on the pretext of averting further tragedies. Since then, they have become a “force weapon of choice” according to a 2010 Western Australian report (see: “Australia: Police use Tasers as ‘weapon of choice’”).

At the same time, police shootings have continued unabated. Last September, when NSW plainclothes police shot a man dead at point-blank range in a Sydney suburb, they claimed he had opened fire on them, contradicting witness accounts. Earlier in 2011, police in the neighbouring state of Victoria shot two people in Melbourne in the space of 18 hours. On both occasions, police chiefs declared that the officers had acted appropriately in self-defence.

All the official responses have followed a familiar pattern. A recent story on ABC television’s “Four Corners” program exposed the police cover up of the shooting of Adam Salter, a mentally-ill man who had attempted to stab himself. On the day of the shooting, acting Assistant Police Commissioner Stuart Wilkins wrongly told a media conference that Salter had “grabbed a knife from the kitchen and confronted police.”

Laudisio Curti’s death cannot be dismissed as an isolated response by officers acting under the pressure of events. Instead, it points to the development of a shoot-to-kill ethos that is encouraged by claims that tough methods are needed to deal with “violent opponents.”

All the time, state and federal governments are boosting police numbers and weaponry to unprecedented levels, resorting to “law-and-order” demagoguery to divert attention from their deepening social assault, destroying jobs and working conditions, and slashing public health, welfare and other essential services.

What happened to Laudisio Curti is a stark warning about the violent police methods that will be used on a wider scale against youth and workers as they come into struggle over mounting job losses, worsening inequality and social devastation.

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