

New evidence emerges on Brazilian student's death in Sydney

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Eye witnesses and family members have cast fresh doubts on the official accounts of the death of 21-year-old Brazilian student Roberto Laudisio Curti. The young man stopped breathing after being sprayed with capsicum gas and Tasered at least three times by Sydney police in the early hours of last Sunday morning.

According to the New South Wales (NSW) police, Laudisio Curti was chased by six officers, tackled to the ground and rendered unconscious on Pitt Street, in the heart of the city's downtown shopping district, because he had resisted arrest and was suspected of stealing a packet of biscuits from a nearby convenience store about half an hour earlier.

A worker from the convenience store, who wished to remain anonymous, has told SBS Radio's Portuguese-language program that the student was not the man who had run off with the biscuits. "The store's worker says it was not the same person who stole the biscuits and the one who died at Pitt Street," SBS host Marcos Moreira reported.

Laudisio Curti's uncle, Joao Eduardo Laudisio, who heads the Brazilian subsidiary of the global manufacturing company Pall Corporation, described as inconceivable the police claims that his nephew was a thief or that his death could have been caused by a pre-existing health defect.

Laudisio, who helped raise the young man after his parents died from cancer, insisted that the visiting student had "money for everything he wants." Moreover, the 21-year-old had been declared "very healthy" by doctors at one of South America's best hospitals during a health check before he left for Australia last year.

Another contradiction emerged in the police story when an eye witness described the police officers

chasing a shirtless man along Pitt Street. The original police report stated that the victim had worn a "white 'Gap' brand short sleeve shirt."

Even before the new revelations, it was obvious there is no justification for what happened to the young man. Potentially lethal force was inflicted on him for no other reason that someone had allegedly earlier taken a single packet of biscuits from a store, without any evidence that Laudisio Curti was even involved. There is no suggestion that the student was armed or posed a threat to anyone, including the police or himself. In fact, he was Tasered in the back while running away from the police, then gassed and Tasered at least two more times, simply because he was judged to be resisting arrest.

The fresh evidence undercuts efforts by the police and the media to claim that the student had been taking drugs and acting in a paranoid manner earlier in the evening, as if that could excuse or explain his death. *News.com*, for example, reported yesterday: "Taser victim Roberto Laudisio Curti spent two days partying in the lead-up to his death, visiting nightclubs and taking drugs."

That claim flew in the face of statements by his soccer teammates from Sydney's Balmain & District Football Club that less than 12 hours before he was killed, the young player had scored a goal for his team. His teammates spoke of a happy, healthy, football-mad student.

Laudisio Curti's death has caused outrage in Brazil, particularly in his home city of Sao Paulo. Within two days, more than 1,300 people had indicated online they would attend a protest outside the Australian consulate in Sao Paulo on March 30 in his memory. The organisers of the Facebook site have urged participants to leave packets of biscuits out the front.

The Brazilian foreign ministry has now ordered its consulate in Sydney to assist the dead man's family and "obtain the necessary clarifications from the Australian authorities." The anger in Brazil has been heightened by the fact that Laudio Curti's death came almost seven years after another high-profile shooting of a young Brazilian man overseas. Jean Charles de Menezes was pinned down by police and shot in the head seven times at point-blank range on a train at a London tube station, two weeks after terrorist bombings struck the city.

In that case too, police attempted to justify their actions by portraying their victim as behaving erratically, causing them to suspect he was a terrorist. In 2009, de Menezes' family was forced to make an out-of-court settlement with the London Metropolitan Police, receiving just a third of the £300,000 compensation they were seeking. The Crown Prosecution Service refused to press charges against any police officer, even after an inquest jury rejected the police account of events.

In Australia, as in other cases of police deaths, the Laudio Curti investigation is to be conducted by the police themselves, supplemented by a coroner and the state Ombudsman, neither of which has investigatory resources.

Seeking to head off the public concern—and no doubt to protect Australia's international education market, which includes a growing influx of nearly 20,000 Brazilian students a year—NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell assured the family that the investigations would be "rigorous" and "independent of government interference."

In reality, police officers are invariably exonerated for deaths in custody, including those of hundreds of indigenous people in recent decades. O'Farrell's Police Minister Michael Gallacher bluntly stated that the purpose of the Ombudsman's inquiry would be to restore "community confidence" in the police use of Tasers.

Like the Labor government that ran NSW between 1995 and 2011, O'Farrell's Liberal National Party administration has boosted police numbers, powers and weaponry, resorting to "law and order" demagoguery to divert attention away from the impact of worsening unemployment, financial stress and social inequality. Between 2000–01 and 2004–05, police numbers rose

by 10 percent, far outstripping the 3 percent population increase. Today, NSW has about 16,000 police.

Police operations have targetted particularly young people. Over the past year, the police force has conducted four operation "Hitch," cracking down on youth in downtown Sydney's financial and tourism precincts, on the pretext of combatting alcohol offences and "anti-social behaviour." The last such exercise, in December, was personally attended by Family and Community Services Minister Pru Goward.

While no youth are reported to have been Tasered during these operations, the violent attack on Laudio Curti is not an aberration. Young people, especially in working-class areas, are routinely subjected to police harassment and intimidation that can include bashings and other forms of violence. The Taser attack is a warning of the methods being developed and the culture being inculcated in police towards youth amid mounting social tensions in Australia and internationally.



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