

Australia: Inquest exposes police brutality in death of Brazilian student

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Evidence given to a two-week inquest in Sydney into the death of Brazilian student Roberto Laudisio Curti has revealed the extent of police violence involved. Around 6 a.m. on March 18, Curti, who was behaving erratically after reportedly sharing a tab of LSD, was chased by 11 policemen in central Sydney, repeatedly tasered, capicum sprayed and hit with batons.

Curti's only "crime" was that he had jumped the counter at a convenience store and taken two packets of biscuits. The coronial inquiry established that he was not armed and posed no threat to anyone. Counsel assisting the coroner, Jeremy Gormly, explained: "There is no suggestion Roberto was doing anything but endeavouring to get away from police ... there is no suggestion he had a weapon ... there is no suggestion he struck or assaulted any person."

Yet police continued to use potentially lethal tasers even when Curti was on the ground and handcuffed. In all, 14 taser shots were fired, of which 9 hit Curti. A junior officer used his taser five times in "drive-stun" mode, that is directly against the skin. This method of taser use is banned in parts of Australia and the United States. Nearly three cans of capicum spray were used against the student, some at very close range. He was also batoned.

Four medical experts testified to the inquiry but could not agree on a cause of death. An emergency physician Dr John Vinen suggested that Curti died of "positional asphyxiation"—that is, he was left in a position in which he could not breathe. Dr Isabella Brouwer, who performed the autopsy, said it was "a very complicated death," with insufficient scientific evidence about the "multiple factors" involved.

Final submissions to the inquest were made last Friday. Coroner Mary Jerram intends to deliver her findings on November 14.

In his summing up, Gormly, the counsel assisting the coroner, acknowledged that the police treatment of Curti, including the tasing, may have contributed to his death. "To what extent should the police be allowed to use a painful item to achieve compliance rather than to protect from danger to life and limb?" he asked the court. "To taser someone who is on the ground, who was surrounded by other officers ... was a thuggish act."

Curti's death provoked protests in Brazil, where demonstrators recalled the British police killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, who was shot dead in 2005 after being wrongfully suspected of being a terrorist bomber. Curti's sister, Ana Luidisio, who sat through the harrowing evidence at the Sydney inquest, told the court: "It's shocking police acted the way they did. Their lack of integrity disgusts me ... There was such a level of brutality that night that it cannot be ignored."

Curti's uncle, Domingos Laudisio, condemned the police actions: "It's unbelievable how many of the policemen lied and colluded. Roberto's behaviour may not have been the most appropriate that night but police decided to punish him. How absurd. He was punished for almost nothing."

Peter Hamill, counsel representing Curti's family, said some of the police officers present at the scene had committed unlawful acts of "sheer brutality". He also accused the police involved of presenting dishonest accounts. "There was a collective memory lapse of

massive proportion and ... we didn't buy it." He called on the court to record Curti's death as "misadventure with precise medical cause unknown at the hands of members of the NSW Police Force."

Murugan Thangaraj, however, the lawyer representing three of the police involved, told the court that the officers had used their tasers in line with police procedure. "You don't need resistance before you use a taser," he said. "You don't need to have an immediate threat to use a taser." He called for no adverse findings against his clients.

Thangaraj's comments confirm that there are few restrictions on the police use of tasers, as well as capsicum spray. Originally introduced a decade ago, following public outrage over fatal police shootings, taser use is now widespread and no longer restricted to specialised units. Since 2008, any policeman in New South Wales who completes yearly training is authorised to carry and use a taser.

In 2010 and 2011, there were 2,032 instances of Taser use in NSW. Curti's is the fifth taser-related death in Australia since 2002. An Amnesty International report in February found that tasers had been associated with more than 500 deaths in the US during the past decade. Moreover, the introduction of tasers and capsicum spray, which were justified as a non-lethal alternative to firearms, has not halted police shootings.

Coroner Jerram last Friday indicated that she would make "strong recommendations" in the case. Her findings, however, are likely to be restricted to the actions of individual officers and to police procedures, in particular on the use of tasers. Counsel assisting the coroner Gormly noted that the inquest had highlighted "a gap in police use of Taser and what might be regarded as a general community acceptance of how it is used."

The callous indifference of the police to the suffering of Curti and their use of overwhelming, potentially lethal force to obtain "compliance" is a product of repeated law-and-order campaigns by successive Liberal and Labor state governments. Young people, particularly working class youth, are routinely targeted

and harassed by police. The police force was strengthened following so-called youth riots in Sydney's Redfern and Macquarie Fields in 2004 and 2005, including the establishment of a specialist Public Order and Riot Squad.

The brutal police treatment of Curti is a sharp warning to the working class and youth. As the global economic crisis worsens and social tensions sharpen, the police are being built up to deal with any resistance to the relentless deterioration of living conditions. Young people especially are regarded as a threat, and the ruling elites will not hesitate to use the full force of the state apparatus against them.



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