

Toronto police murder of teen Sammy Yatim provokes popular anger

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More than a thousand people marched through downtown Toronto on Monday evening to protest the police killing of Sammy Yatim. An 18-year old Syrian immigrant, Yatim was gunned down in a rain of bullets early Saturday morning on an empty Toronto streetcar almost immediately after two dozen police arrived on the scene.

Although Yatim was in evident distress and threatening no one, the police made no effort to calm him or otherwise contain and defuse the situation.

The shooting has produced great anger amongst the people of Toronto who only three years ago witnessed mass police brutality during the G20 Summit and have seen at least a dozen citizens recklessly killed by police over the past twenty years.

The protest, which began as a vigil for the slain teenager, was organized on Facebook by the friends and family of the dead youth. As the march wound through the city's streets, it was spontaneously joined by hundreds of outraged pedestrians, many of them returning home after a day's work.

Led by Yatim's sister, Sarah, and his mother, Sahar, the procession marched to the busy west-end intersection where the slaying occurred. Protesters shouted "Justice for Sammy!" and wore t-shirts that read "Protect us from our protectors."

"Since when did it become a crime to be a teenager, I ask you?" one of Yatim's uncles told the *Toronto Star*. "And since when does a scrawny 110-pound-something teenager become a threat to a dozen or so brawny policemen, when he is isolated in an empty streetcar that they felt that they had no other choice but to use lethal force?"

"We thought he was safe in Canada. We thought something like this happens only in Syria," a friend of the dead youth told reporters.

The public outrage over Yatim's killing has been fed by a video of the shooting recorded by nearby witness Markus Grupp. The video shows Yatim standing beside the driver's seat in a stationary and empty streetcar, holding an object in one of his hands. Three police officers with guns trained on

the lone individual stand several meters outside the front doors and repeatedly shout, "Drop the knife!" Yatim replies with the words, "You're a fucking pussy," but takes no hostile action and retreats a few steps into the streetcar.

Twenty-three seconds into the video, one of the three officers tells Yatim, "If you take one step in this direction... [inaudible]." Seconds later, after the officer shouts, "Don't move," Yatim walks toward the front doors and the policeman fires three shots at him. Separate video from a security camera appears to confirm that Yatim crumples to the floor essentially prostrate after being struck by the initial salvo, whereupon, after a brief pause, the officer fires six more shots at him. The scene is then flooded with police officers.

One policeman then approaches the still motionless Yatim and, for good measure, tasers him.

Before the police arrived, the youth had reportedly produced a small knife and ordered the passengers and the driver off the streetcar. By all accounts, at the time of his killing Yatim was in a state of heightened emotional stress, though no evidence has surfaced indicating that he ever intended to physically harm anyone, nor that he was suffering from a psychological disorder.

What is patently clear is that police made no effort to de-escalate the situation. One of the videos of Saturday's shooting shows that the first police officer to approach the streetcar already had his gun drawn.

According to the videographer, Grupp—and this is corroborated by clips from his video of bystanders in close proximity to police surrounding the streetcar—police did not cordon off the area on arriving at the scene, although this is standard operating procedure in such situations.

Yatim's friends and family have uniformly proclaimed their shock at his death and their anger at the sensationalist accounts the corporate media have presented of his character. Yatim's father, Nabil, described his son as "an average kid, loved by his friends. Now, you have totally different versions coming out." According to his roommates, Yatim "had a lot of motivation" and "wanted to be on his

own and make something of himself.”

After his parents divorced, Yatim came to Canada to live with his father and usually spent his summers with his mother at her home in Aleppo, Syria, until the outbreak of hostilities in 2011. One of his friends related that Yatim missed his home country and was critical of the corporate media’s representation of the ongoing US-stoked Syrian civil war.

On Monday Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair hastily organized a press conference to try to deflect mounting anger over Yatim’s murder. He announced that the Special Investigations Unit (SIU)—the nominally independent, provincial government-appointed police watchdog—would investigate Yatim’s death, even though such an investigation was automatic under the SIU’s mandate.

The police officer who fired the fatal shots, six-year veteran Constable James Forcillo, has been suspended with pay. While police officers can, on extremely rare occasions, be suspended without pay in other Canadian jurisdictions, in Ontario it is mandatory that they continue to receive their pay no matter how egregious their conduct. Currently, no charges have been laid against Forcillo.

A glance at the record of Toronto police killings and their subsequent whitewashing by SIU investigations makes clear that despite all of Blair’s declarations of concern and due-process, the police and SIU will stop at nothing to “protect their own” and to defend the police’s lavish budgets and ever-expanding powers. In this, they are aided and abetted by a political establishment and sycophantic corporate media that for two decades has been promoting a reactionary “law and order” agenda, while regularly praising the “thin blue line” as “pillars of our freedoms.”

In February 2012, Michael Eligon, a 29-year old who suffered from mental illness, was shot and killed in Toronto’s east-end by a police officer. Eligon had wandered into a nearby neighbourhood from a local hospital where he was undergoing a mental health assessment. At the time of the shooting, Eligon was clothed in a hospital gown and, according to a witness, was walking “zombie-like” with a pair of scissors towards a line of police officers. According to the SIU, the police at the scene could thus “reasonably conclude that Mr. Eligon was an armed and dangerous individual.” The implicated officer was cleared of any wrongdoing.

Sylvia Klibingaitis, a 52-year old woman with a history of mental health issues, was shot and killed in north Toronto by a police officer in October 2011, after she called 911 to report that she was going to commit a crime. After shouting at Klibingaitis to drop a knife she was holding, the responding officer shot three times, hitting her once in the chest and killing her. Klibingaitis’ sister, Anita Wasowicz,

said that the officer’s yells “exacerbated the crisis.” But the SIU—true to its record of defending the police—exonerated the officer in question, saying that he had made “reasonable efforts” to subdue her without the use of deadly force.

Similar cases litter the annals of the Toronto Police Service. Invariably, the officers involved are exonerated or let off with less than a slap on the wrist. Inquest after inquest held in the aftermath of such killings make recommendations of improved training and “dialogue” with mental health organizations, but the policy of meeting crisis situations with violent force has remained the police’s *modus operandi*.

A climate of impunity is being consciously fostered among law enforcement bodies nationwide. This week’s acquittal of the first of four policemen tried for perjury in the infamous 2007 Taser killing of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski is but the latest example. On Tuesday, RCMP Constable Bill Bentley, one of the officers caught on videotape repeatedly tasing the unarmed, distraught and non-threatening immigrant in the Vancouver airport, was exonerated by a judge, despite the evidence that all of the officers involved lied under oath and colluded in falsifying their testimony.

Not one police officer has been criminally convicted for a spate of beatings and illegal arrests that took place during the Toronto G20 protests in 2010. These brutal assaults, well-documented by journalists and protest participants, have been scrupulously swept under the rug, lest the political fallout hit the architects of the mass repression in the municipal, provincial and federal governments.

The lavish budgets and salaries of police forces across the country, the passing of draconian legislation that criminalizes dissent, and the impunity afforded to law enforcement officials all serve very definite political aims. Under conditions of mounting social inequality and working class opposition to the austerity programs being implemented by the representatives of the ruling class, these well-equipped and lethal bodies of armed men are being groomed to serve as ruthless enforcers of the status quo.



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