

Social welfare workers killed in New Zealand shooting

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Two New Zealand Work and Income (WINZ) workers were killed and one seriously wounded when a homeless welfare recipient allegedly fired at them with a shotgun on September 2. The workers were all long-standing employees of the WINZ office in the South Island provincial town of Ashburton.

According to police, a balaclava-clad man carrying a sawn-off shotgun entered the office and fired several shots before fleeing on a bike. John Henry Tully, 48, a WINZ client with the Ashburton agency, was tracked down by police and arrested later the same day at a nearby farm. Tully has been charged with the murder of Peggy Noble, 67, and Susan Leigh Cleveland, 55, and the attempted murder of Lindy Curtis, aged 43.

The incident, which is a tragedy on every level, reflects the sharpening social tensions within New Zealand. The shooting took place just three weeks out from the September 20 national parliamentary elections. While occasional lip-service has been paid during the election campaign to deepening inequality and poverty, particularly among children, all of the political parties are committed to a pro-market program that will accelerate the destruction of jobs, living standards and public services.

The dire personal situation of the accused is a stark indication of the social conditions confronting the working class. Tully had moved back to Ashburton, where he was born and raised, after working in the Australian mines. He recently became homeless and spoke to the *Ashburton Guardian* about his frustration at the lack of accommodation in the town. He said he had a skin disease that caused him to be placed on a disability benefit. Rents in Ashburton, near the earthquake-ravaged city of Christchurch, were more than \$300 a week and outside his reach.

Tully was living rough while on the waiting list for a

Housing New Zealand (HNZ) property and was angered by the way government agencies handled his situation. He had been removed from the WINZ office earlier last month. He said his doctor recommended he stay somewhere warm and dry to alleviate his condition. “WINZ have cut me off from all other help other than the [disability] benefit,” Tully complained.

Last month, Tully pitched his tent in the Ashburton Domain as a protest. He was evicted by police and lived in his car until he sold it, and moved to the nearby riverbed. A major source of frustration was a HNZ property in Ashburton, which he alleged was unoccupied and in which he hoped to live. Tully had been convicted on a firearms charge and threatening to kill in 2002, when a landlord served him an eviction notice in order to renovate and sell the flat.

Social Development Minister Paula Bennett flatly rejected Tully’s claims against WINZ, telling the media he had been receiving all his entitlements and had been offered “a lot of assistance that he had turned down.” She said Tully’s behaviour in the past had been “intimidating.”

The fact is that WINZ, the agency that administers the social welfare system, is charged with enforcing many of the austerity measures imposed by successive National and Labour-led governments, a process that has accelerated since the 2008 global financial crisis.

In the past three years, thousands of people, particularly sole parents and unemployed youth, have been subjected to a stringent new “work testing” regime and forced off benefits. The National government has slashed its forecast welfare spending this year by \$1 billion. Last year, it introduced restricted criteria for state housing tenants, and plans to sell off thousands of houses around the country, amid soaring rents.

No government has restored the previous level of benefits after National's former finance minister, Ruth Richardson, brought down her infamous "mother of all budgets" in 1991, savagely cutting welfare and throwing most beneficiaries into poverty.

The Accommodation Supplement and In-Work Tax Credit have not been adjusted for inflation for nine years, effectively slashing hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance to poor families. Poverty-level invalid and unemployment benefits, deliberately suppressed to maintain the downward pressure on wages, have not been adjusted for 23 years. According to the Ministry of Social Development, 285,000 children are living in poverty.

Ongoing cuts to mental health provisions have forced vulnerable people out of mental health care and left them to either fend for themselves or turn to the ill-equipped social welfare system. The *Dominion Post* reported on August 27 that more mentally ill people would soon be living on the streets of Wellington. A District Health Board shake-up would withdraw funding to eight mental health service providers that between them looked after 150 clients. Most were expected to close their doors.

Action Against Poverty spokesman Alastair Russell told NZ Newswire that people are frequently denied rent and bond, advances, housing, food grants and money for essential household items, despite being entitled to them. "There are massive discrepancies between what exists in legal entitlements in law and the policies and practices at Work and Income," Russell said. While some WINZ clients occasionally lashed out, he generally dealt with people "in tears and desperate for help."

An intensifying social crisis is played out every week in WINZ offices around the country. Last week's shooting was the worst in a long list of incidents, the result of pent-up frustration, poverty and bureaucratic treatment on the government's part. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, serious assaults and threats against WINZ staff jumped 43 percent in the past two years, despite the posting of security guards in its 157 offices. Assaults and threats increased from 201 in 2011 to 247 in 2012 and 288 last year.

In the days following the shootings, several WINZ offices were closed when a dozen fresh threats were received. Bennett responded by announcing stepped up

"zero tolerance" security measures, including more active policing of entry into WINZ premises, even at the expense of more people not being able to get prompt welfare assistance.



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