Two more Australian police killings in working-class areas

Mike Head
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Following two fatal police shootings within two days in the state of Queensland there is mounting evidence of an officially-sanctioned "shoot to kill" policy in working-class areas. The two killings brought the number to four in suburbs around Brisbane, the state capital, since late September. Another man was shot in the head at close range, but survived.

This pattern of shootings, coming on top of the massive military-police operation imposed on Brisbane during the recent G20 summit, points to a calculated attempt to further intimidate and silence discontent amid conditions of worsening unemployment and social distress. Throughout the G20 summit, 7,000 heavily-armed police saturated the city, backed by military personnel, including snipers on rooftops.

In both the latest incidents, it appears that police officers followed a policy of shooting to kill, rather than to incapacitate, even though neither victim had a firearm. Far from there being any question of the police being held accountable for the deaths, let alone charged with homicide, the state's police chief moved immediately to defend them.

Last Sunday at 2 p.m., a 51-year-old grandfather was shot dead by police while attending a family birthday party at Tewantin, on the Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane. Witnesses reported three shots being fired into the man's chest. Police alleged that the victim had a knife—later found to be a metal bar—and "lunged" at them with the "weapon."

A local resident told ABC radio he was "shocked" and "stunned" by the police response. "I don't know why they had to take him out. He didn't have a gun," he said. "Surely they can just drop them to the ground with a shot in the leg or a shot in the arm." He added: "I have seen this happen before and I have thought the exact same thing—why do they have to kill these people?"

Queensland Police Commissioner Ian Stewart indicated that the police were implementing an official policy. "We have a wonderful model that we use in Queensland, which provides the officer with a decision-making tool to use the most appropriate force in the circumstances," he told reporters.

Likewise, Police Union president Ian Leavers, while telling ABC radio the officers had "no option to do anything else, it all happened so quickly," pointed to a training regime. "The training is a firearm should be used to stop the threat," he said.

A day later, just before 7 p.m. on Monday, police killed Troy Foster, 32, in Southport on the Gold Coast, south of Brisbane. Again, the police alleged that Foster ran at them with a knife. A witness described four shots being fired.

Foster had a history of mental illness. In a bid to justify the shooting, the Police Union told the media that he was a "potential suspect" in an armed robbery, but the police did not even claim that was connected to the shooting.

Both Tewantin and Southport, while near high-profile tourist beaches and resorts, have suffered severe unemployment since the 2008 global financial breakdown. Now the social crisis is worsening under the impact of federal and state government austerity measures and the disintegration of the mining boom, which underpinned Queensland's economy for two decades. In Tewantin, the official jobless rate stands at 8.3 percent and in Southport it is 9.0 percent.

Similar, or even worse, conditions exist in the other areas where recent police killings occurred. Last week, police killed Laval Zimmer, 33, inside his home at Kippa-Ring, another working-class suburb with high unemployment on Brisbane's northern outskirts.

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Zimmer also had a known history of mental health problems.

Three days earlier, during the G20 summit, police violently manhandled a 20-year-old disabled man with half his legs missing at the Sunnybank shopping plaza, on Brisbane's southside, despite calls by a crowd of shoppers to stop the assault.

The series of shootings began in late September, during the lead-up to the G20 summit, when a paramilitary unit besieged and killed a 42-year-old former oil rig worker in nearby Inala, horrifying local residents. Last month, police shot a man in the head at Rochedale, also in the same area, but he survived.

Yesterday, in an attempt to head off mounting public concern, Police Commissioner Stewart said he would launch an internal review of training and other policies, after briefing Police Minister Jack Dempsey.

Yet, in the same breath, Stewart preempted any review of the killings themselves. On ABC radio, he flatly defended the shootings and "refuted totally" claims that officers were over-aggressive. Instead, he insisted, police were "hyper-vigilant."

Stewart added a chilling statement of intent to the effect that the public had to get used to such killings. "One of the things we need to do is to demonstrate both to the public and media the sorts of scenarios our people are confronted with," he emphasised.

Further evidence of an underlying policy emerged when Bond University criminologist and former police inspector Terry Goldsworthy told the media that a recent "focus on lethal force options" for police risked creating a "siege mentality." Goldsworthy said there was "a push from the highest level for police to be armed" after an escalation in perceived threats from terrorism, the G20 summit and a crackdown on so-called bikie gangs.

The state's Crime and Corruption Commission (CCC) said it was seeking government approval for a "high priority" research project into police shootings. It gave Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie, "a draft research plan," its spokesman said.

The CCC and its predecessors have a long history, under Liberal National Party and Labor Party governments alike, of being used to divert public anger into official channels, then whitewashing police violence. This included exonerating the police responsible for the deaths of Daniel Yock, a 19-year-old Aboriginal dancer, in Brisbane in 1993, and Mulrunji Doomagee, 36, who died in a police cell on Palm Island, a notorious former penal camp for indigenous people.

In Victoria, where the state's chief coroner similarly reviewed police shootings after a wave of deaths in the 1980s and 1990s, no police officers were ever held responsible. The only significant outcome was the arming of police with additional potentially lethal weapons—capsicum spray, then taser guns—on the pretext of reducing fatalities.

Instead, the deaths have continued. A report by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) last year found there were 105 fatal police shootings nationwide between 1989 and 2011, or just under five a year, with nearly half the victims having some form of mental illness. At the same time four people were killed by police tasers between 2009 and 2012.

Now that annual toll has been almost reached in two months in Queensland alone. The renewal of the "war on terrorism," both in the Middle East and domestically, and the police-state conditions created for the G20 summit have been used to advance the preparations being made to put down social unrest and opposition to the corporate and bipartisan agenda of war and austerity.

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