

UK Police Federation votes for all police to be given access to Taser guns

Margot Miller
11 February 2015

The Police Federation has voted for all uniformed officers in Britain to be given access to a Taser gun. In a significant move towards the police in the UK being routinely armed, on Monday the interim national board of the Police Federation voted unanimously for the policy.

A Taser is a gun-shaped weapon that uses compressed air to fire two darts that trail an electric cable back to the handset, delivering a 50,000-volt electric shock. When delivered, the electric current causes massive pain and disrupts voluntary muscle control, so the victim either freezes or falls to the ground.

Following the vote, Police Federation head Steve White said, “This is a step in the right direction and we will now work with ACPO [Association of Chief Police Officers], individual chief officers, the Superintendents’ Association and the Home Office to progress this as a matter of urgency. We have long called for a wider rollout of Taser. Now the time is right for all operational police officers to have the option to carry Taser....”

White met Home Secretary Theresa May yesterday for a scheduled meeting, with reports stating that he was going to discuss with her the need for additional government funding for purchasing Tasers and providing training.

On Tuesday, even before the government had announced any plans, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the commissioner of London’s Metropolitan Police, announced that the number of police officers with access to Tasers would be drastically stepped up on the capital’s streets. At present, four police officers armed with Taser stun guns patrol in two cars in each borough. Howe said in future 100 or more Taser officers could be on duty at any one time.

In the run-up to the vote, White used the pretext of combating terrorism to insist that the arming of police with Tasers was necessary. Citing the killing of Fusilier Lee Rigby in Woolwich in 2013, White told the *Guardian* that “the terrorist ideal to get attention no longer relies on an attack being in a place of note.... It could be any part of the UK. We know there are more dangerous people out there, preparing to attack police officers.”

White claimed that giving all police routine access to a Taser “is a defensive tool and a tactical option.... The alternative is to have officers out there without anything at all. We have to do something.”

This fear-mongering came in the wake of the heightened security threat following the terrorist murders of staff at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. In its aftermath, the UK terror threat was raised two levels to “severe”, with the military placed on standby. This is the fourth highest of five levels and follows an assessment by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre based within MI5.

Prior to this week’s vote, an anonymous police chief speaking to the *Guardian* said if the policy went through, it would be “a stepping stone to arming the police.”

The vast majority of the 125,000 police officers in the UK do not carry firearms. The carrying of firearms in the UK is at present confined to authorised firearms officers (AFOs). In 2010, there were 6,653 AFO officers who are often deployed in armed response vehicles.

Home Office figures released last year show the use of Tasers by the police has increased year-on-year since it was first introduced in 2004 to firearms officers only. Since 2007, 10 percent of officers have been trained in its use. In 2013, it was deployed on 4,999 occasions,

compared to 1,297 times in 2009. Between January and June of last year, Tasers were fired 826 times out of the 5,107 occasions when they were deployed. Tasers were used, in total, 10,488 times in England and Wales in the 12 months to the end of June 2014, a 13 per cent increase on the previous year.

Some police forces have a much higher rate of use proportionate to their size, such as West Midlands Police. Greater Manchester Police are using Tasers, in so-called drive-stun mode, more than other areas. Taser use on children by the Metropolitan Police rose sixfold in the last four years.

As its use has increased, so have complaints recorded by the police watchdog, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). The IPCC has noted the use of the Taser at point-blank range “purely as a means of pain compliance.” In drive-stun mode, the Taser is held against the subject’s body and the trigger is pulled without the firing of probes. This causes extreme pain without the incapacitating muscular spasms. Sometimes both modes are used.

Amnesty International has reported hundreds of Taser-associated deaths throughout the world. Since its introduction in the UK, 10 people have died in England and Wales after being tasered. Such was the outcry that Home Secretary Theresa May ordered a review into the use of Tasers last October, amid concerns that physical restraint and the use of Tasers are being used too often against the mentally ill.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) described the use of Tasers as a “form of torture that can kill.”

Death can result from Taser-induced arrhythmia, which is the uncoordinated contraction of the cardiac muscles so they tremble rather than contract. If this continues for more than a few seconds, blood circulation ceases, leading to cardiac arrest. Death occurs within minutes. The Taser can also disrupt breathing.

According to US cardiologist and emeritus professor at Indiana University Dr. Douglas Zipes, “Taser shots to the chest can produce cardiac arrest.”

He warned that serious complications could arise if used against people with impaired heart function or a pacemaker. The manufacturer, US-based Taser International, cautions against shots to the chest, yet figures show that since 2009 in the UK, 57 percent of

discharges have hit the chest area.

The ACPO claims there is “no substantial risk” from the use of the Taser. In the US, however, Taser International was ordered to pay \$15 million to the family of Darryl Turner, who died after being tasered in 2008.

Of the 10 Taser-related deaths investigated by the IPCC, none have been attributed by them to the high-voltage charge. Two of the 10 cases are still undergoing investigation, including the death of 23-year-old factory worker Jordan Lee Begley in July 2013, who was, at the time, under care for a possible heart condition.

A police officer tasered a 61-year-old blind man in the back in Chorley Lancashire 2012, after his white stick had been reported as a Samurai sword. The officer was given a performance improvement notice. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided no criminal charges should be brought over the incident.

An inquiry is under way as to why three teenage boys, aged between 14 and 15, with learning difficulties, were tasered at their school near Plymouth late last year by Devon and Cornwall police.

On December 8 of last year, a peaceful protest at Warwick University against high tuition fees and education cuts was broken up by the police, who used CS gas and brute force to end the occupation. A Taser was fired into the air.

The vote for making Tasers available for use by all police officers follows proposals to use water cannon, rubber bullets and live firearms.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact