

Australia: Sydney residents shocked by police shooting of 22-year-old woman

Our reporters
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Many residents of Hoxton Park, in southwestern Sydney, have been deeply shocked by the police killing of 22-year-old Courtney Topic in the suburb last week. Her death was another indication of growing police violence in working-class suburbs and evidence of an officially-sanctioned “shoot to kill” policy.

The young woman was reportedly in a disoriented state at about 11.30 a.m. on February 10, near a Hungry Jacks restaurant. She was sipping a takeaway drink and carrying a kitchen knife.

Topic, who had committed no offence, was surrounded by at least four heavily-armed police, who demanded that she drop the knife. When she allegedly failed to comply, Topic was sprayed with capsicum, Tasered and then shot in the chest at 11.45 a.m.

A day later it was revealed that the young woman suffered from Asperger’s syndrome and could have been confused and frightened by police demands. Some eye-witnesses told the media that the young woman was not threatening anyone or herself.

Topic was the second person killed by New South Wales police in the past four weeks and the fifth individual gunned down by Australian police in the last six months. Her death was accompanied by a large police mobilisation to the area. These increasingly brutal operations are part and parcel of an escalating assault on basic democratic rights under the banner of the bogus “war on terror.”

Hoxton Park residents who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* had deep concerns about the shooting. Most rejected the official police claims that they were acting in self-defence and said police could have easily disarmed Topic.

Some residents made comparisons with the escalating police violence in the US and others noted the impact of government cuts to mental health and other social

services.

Katarina, a young mother shopping with her two children at the nearby Carnes Hill Marketplace, said she initially thought the police acted in self-defence.

“But then I found out that [the young woman] had Asperger’s and that shouting makes it worse. Obviously the police didn’t know that she had Asperger’s but she did have some sort of a condition and they should have handled it differently. I think it was completely wrong what the police did. There could have been a different outcome.

“About five years ago my parents’ neighbours’ son was in a similar [situation]. He wasn’t holding a knife or putting anyone in danger but he was in the St George Leagues Club and a fight broke out. He was Tasered by the police, which caused him to fall in some water and have a massive heart attack. He was only in his early thirties. His mum hasn’t gotten over it to this day.”

Ron, a 42-year-old worker, said: “I feel for the father because I have two young girls. What the police did was wrong. This could have been prevented because they could have disarmed her in some other way.

“Maybe the police panicked but they had four policemen who have the power to disarm, not to shoot. I think that the government should look out for people that have a disability and take care of them first.”

Commenting on last year’s police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, Ron added: “Over there [in the US] they shoot to kill. If the government doesn’t stop it here then it will be like the US.”

When it was pointed out that Australian governments were already pursuing similar policies, Ron referred to the recent capsicum spraying of protesting students in Sydney. The students were demonstrating outside the Sydney Masonic Centre where federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne was delivering a speech.

“One of the ladies [in the protest] was blinded,” Ron commented. “I don’t think people here have freedom of speech.”

Helen, who has a 31-year-old autistic son, said she was “very worried” about the police response. “How come they had to shoot her?” she asked. “Why did they shoot her straight away? Why didn’t they try to calm her down?”

“This was not right. The police have everything to protect themselves—shields, batons, vest etc.—and could have easily disarmed her.”

Helen referred to the huge police operation that surrounded the shooting. “I found out about the shooting after we went to pick up my son from Bonnyrigg at one o’clock. When we returned, Hoxton Park Road was still blocked and so we went into a nearby church car park and waited. It was nearly five o’clock before we were able to get to the estate where our home is.”

Helen explained that her autistic son, whose conditions has deteriorated in the last seven years, could not speak properly and became agitated when voices were raised. “We take him to a special school Monday and Friday but otherwise he stays in the house. He gets very bored when at home so we take him for drives and that makes him happy...”

“I’m so worried about the way the police acted because our son could have been there in that situation.”

An elderly Spanish man, who wished to remain anonymous, stated bluntly: “The police said they couldn’t disarm her but I’m 67 years old and I could have restrained her on my own. The police could do this easily with just one officer... We’re becoming like America and that’s no good. People are becoming scared. They’re afraid to come out of their doors.”

Mark, originally from the Philippines, said he was saddened by the shooting. “In Australia there is a growing inequality like in the Philippines,” he commented. “The government here wants to impose a co-payment if you want to see the doctor and there is a danger that health services will be put into private hands like in the United States. This will make costs way too high, with only the very rich able to afford healthcare.

“In the Philippines there are lots of young unemployed people, with many people forced to look

for jobs outside of the country. There’s a lot of underemployment. Highly qualified people are working at fast food restaurants, like engineers. This creates a lot of inequality and when the people, who are tired of all this hardship, protest the government usually orders the military to repress the people. There were mass protests in the 1980s. I think there are similarities between here and the Philippines.”

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