

Australian police fatally shoot 51-year-old postal worker

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New South Wales (NSW) police officers gunned down and killed 51-year-old post office worker Steve Hodge last Wednesday in front of his horrified mother and dozens of shoppers in Warners Bay at Lake Macquarie, 160 kilometres north of Sydney.

Hodge was the fourth person killed by police in the Australian state since the beginning of this year and the seventh to be fatally shot nationally in the past nine months.

The regular police killings, for which officers are inevitably exonerated, point to the officially-sanctioned preparations to deal with the growing social tensions produced by the agenda of austerity now being imposed by governments at state and federal levels. The increasingly brutal police operations are part and parcel of an escalating assault on basic democratic rights over the past decade and a half.

Hodge died after three plain-clothes police officers from Lake Macquarie Local Area Command were dispatched to the Warner Bay shops following a phone call from a woman. She saw the postal worker with a large knife and thought he was waving it at another man, believed to be a fellow employee.

The police, who arrived within minutes, reportedly made no attempt to defuse the situation. They immediately drew their guns and made no use of capsicum spray or a Taser. After demanding Hodge put down the knife, they shot him three times in the chest when he began to move forward.

Some media reports claimed that Hodge “ran at police” and “lunged at them” with the knife, but these accounts were not borne out by people at the scene. Distraught witnesses told the media that Hodge’s life was over in less than one minute.

It is now known that Hodge had a long history of mental illness, exacerbated by the recent death of his father. He was reportedly sent home from work sick on the day of

the fatal incident, after coming back late from lunch. Hodge phoned his mother, who arrived at the shopping area just before her son was shot. In the meantime, Hodge went to a nearby supermarket where he purchased a knife before returning to the lane near the post office.

According to one witness, before the police arrived Hodge attempted to cut his own wrist and was urged by the fellow employee, who was standing some way back, not to do so.

Another witness told the media: “He (Hodge) looked really distressed. One hand was holding the knife and the other was kind of covering his face.”

By all accounts, Hodge was not a violent man and was well liked and highly regarded by co-workers. Post office clients who knew Hodge described him as a “friendly guy who loved to share a joke.” A worker from a nearby business said “he was lovely and kind and a great postal worker.”

Whatever the immediate issue that triggered Hodge’s behaviour on the fatal day, there is no doubt that the growing social stress and anxiety in working class areas, would have been a contributing factor. Hodge’s own employer, the federal government-owned Australia Post, is in the process of destroying another 1,900 jobs.

Federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, are slashing a range of vital social programs, including those that deliver essential assistance to people with mental health problems. Last year, \$53.8 million was cut from the Partners in Recovery program, which supports people with severe and persistent mental illness and provides help to their carers.

In an attempt at political damage-control, NSW Northern Region police commander Assistant Commissioner Jeff Loy called a press conference after the fatal shooting to announce that the incident would be investigated by the Professional Standards Command—that is, by the police themselves.

It is a foregone conclusion that no action will be taken against the officers involved. Official guidelines make the use of lethal force the preferred option in such situations.

Hodge's shooting follows a pattern of increasing police repression and violence throughout Australia. State police have also been equipped with automatic rifles and armoured vehicles, once only deployed in war zones, and with powers to lock down entire suburbs and cities.

In January, NSW police tasered to death a roof tiler in a fast food restaurant in the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney, following a domestic dispute with his partner. A month later police capsicum-sprayed, tasered then shot to death a disoriented 22-year-old woman in the Sydney suburb of Hoxton Park.

In March, police called to a domestic dispute shot and killed a 45-year-old man on his front porch in the NSW Central Coast suburb of Ettalong, around 50 kilometres south of Warners Bay.

Following the Ettalong shooting, NSW police officials confirmed that officers were not required to first use capsicum spray or a Taser before resorting to using guns. Instead, they were trained to shoot "at body mass"—that is, at the chest—thus ensuring that injuries are likely to result in death.

Late last year, Queensland police shot and killed three people in separate incidents. One victim was a 51-year-old man with a history of mental illness. In another of the shootings, in September 2014, the Queensland police Special Response Team deployed a Lenco "Bearcat" military-style armoured vehicle in the working-class suburb of Inala. After locking down a residential area for hours, heavily-armed police commandos shot dead a 45-year-old man, allegedly armed with a handgun.

Military-style vehicles have also been used this year in the working-class suburbs of Liverpool in Sydney and West Footscray in Melbourne, pursuing young suspects in drug and burglary cases.



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