Witness to New Zealand police shooting: “It was not necessary to kill that man”

Our reporters
13 October 2015

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Christian Haider, a resident of Upper Hutt, north of Wellington, who witnessed the fatal shooting of 25-year-old Pera Smiler by police on September 8. He and his daughter were among several people who watched the events unfold on Main Street, in the town centre in the middle of the day. They saw the shooting from a Turkish restaurant across the road.

Haider’s comments and other statements by witnesses to the media suggest that Smiler wanted to die, but that the police shooting was unjustified. Smiler was armed with a rifle when he entered a McDonald’s outlet and frightened onlookers by firing shots into the ceiling, but apparently did not attempt to shoot anyone. He then walked into the street, where he was confronted by police and shot dead.

“It was a scary situation,” Haider said. “At the same time it was clear that [Smiler] wasn’t really out to injure anybody. Because when it started there were still people around and he was not a danger to the public. The police must have seen that too. He was scary, but not to injure or kill someone, and everybody with a little bit of intelligence must have seen that. I talked with lots of people afterwards, they all said the same. I still bump into people and they all say, it was not necessary to kill that man.”

Haider described in detail how the shooting unfolded: “He was walking up and down with his rifle hanging down next to his side.

“I didn’t see any police and I didn’t know that he was shouting to the police. I learned that later. It looked like he was just shouting into the air. Then I saw the police guy approaching him, from around the corner with the dog. Then I knew immediately there was going to be a disaster.

“The police dog came first and was immediately all over him, then the police officer came around the corner. They were just five metres away from each other ... When [Smiler] was attacked, of course he lifted his rifle and he was starting to aim. I heard a shot or two shots, I can’t remember, and he went down behind a bench.”

According to some reports, Smiler fired at the police dog. Haider commented: “We were all in tears in the restaurant, everyone was shocked, they were speechless.”

Haider explained that in his witness statement to police, “I said ‘I want to stress that I found it completely unnecessary.’ What became clear was that their policy is ‘shoot to kill.’ They don’t shoot to injure. They talked with [Smiler] for *five minutes*. Isn’t that ridiculous? The guy was so disturbed.”

Another witness, Lesley Sole, told 3 News on October 6 that she spoke to Smiler for several minutes before he was shot. “We had a good conversation and he was relaxed. I wasn’t scared of him,” she said. Sole, who worked in a local shop, said Smiler appeared to be ready to give himself up when suddenly he was attacked by the police dog and then shot dead just a few metres away from her.

Police superintendent Sam Hoyle dismissed Sole’s statements, telling the *Dominion Post* the officers who killed Smiler had “acted with considerable courage and professionalism.” He claimed that security camera footage, which has not been released publicly, “provides a different perspective of the events.”

The killing of Pera Smiler followed the similar police shooting of David Cerven, a 21-year-old Slovakian man, in Auckland in August. Reports indicate that, like Smiler, Cerven may have been suicidal. Many details are still not known but a coroner revealed that Cerven was unarmed. Police nevertheless defended the

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shooting.

The media also defended the killings, which are part of a significant rise in the use of lethal force by police. A *New Zealand Herald* editorial on September 10 described the police as “completely professional” and called the shootings “a regretted necessity,” placing the blame on the victims.

Haider showed the WSWS a letter he sent the *Herald* on September 17, which condemned the killing of Smiler and said: “In my view [the] police attitude is fundamentally wrong, leads to unnecessary death.” The paper chose not to publish the letter.

Haider said he agreed with a WSWS article on the shootings, which noted that the victims were young men “whose lives have been profoundly disrupted by debt, unemployment and economic hardship ... As in America, where police now kill more than two people a day, the government’s response to the rising social tensions produced by its policies is to expand the prison system and boost the police, including by arming them with more deadly weapons.”

Haider said there was an increasing police presence in Upper Hutt, which is part of the metropolitan area of Wellington, New Zealand’s capital. “When living conditions go downhill, of course more crimes pop up, there are more police. All over the world it’s the same.”

Speaking about the social conditions in Upper Hutt, a town of 40,000 people, Haider said, “When you walk the street you can see people are so neglected, so uncared for. It’s sad to see. There’s a lot of poverty, not just financial but emotional poverty. It’s pretty stark in Upper Hutt, starker than I’ve seen in other areas.”

According to the 2013 Census, more than a third of Upper Hutt residents earn less than $NZ20,000 a year ($US13,300). Official unemployment increased from 5 percent in 2006, before the global financial crisis, to 6.8 percent in 2013.

“On the main street one third of shops have closed, they’re empty,” Haider stated. “There is not even a movie theatre; it closed down a year ago. When you look around, it feels more and more like there is nothing vibrant. The only really nice thing left is the library and the museum.”

He denounced the National Party government’s brutal treatment of welfare recipients like Smiler, who was facing charges for alleged welfare fraud when he was killed. “I know how people are treated, I’ve heard so many stories, it’s horrific,” Haider said. “These people are treated like rubbish. They have to go through an inhumane process, it’s unbelievable. I understand very well that people get so pissed off, so angry.”

In April, the government announced that it had reduced the number of welfare recipients to the lowest level since March 2009, even though unemployment nationally had increased from 5.0 percent to 5.8 percent since then. Tens of thousands of poor people have been pushed off or simply denied welfare payments and left to fend for themselves as part of the government’s austerity agenda.

These conditions, along with the growing brutality of the state, have contributed to a record number of suicides throughout the country and to the tragic death of Pera Smiler.

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