

New Zealand: Family denounces “cold-blooded execution” by police

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22 June 2016

On June 10, New Zealand police officers shot and killed Mike Taylor, 57, on a driveway at his home in Karangahake Gorge, near Paeroa, a town of about 3,900 residents.

The killing is the latest in a series of incidents involving the use of fatal force by police, amid the growing social tensions being generated by the country’s worsening economic crisis. Thirty-one people have been fatally shot by police since 1941, including three last year. In every case so far, the officers involved have not been charged.

Taylor’s partner Natalie Avery said they had had an argument in which Taylor threw a hot cup of coffee at her and she “called police, but I wish I hadn’t.” She told Fairfax Media that Taylor threw a machete and sickle at the police car when it arrived. He then turned his back, put his hands in the air as instructed by police and began to kneel.

Avery claims that while preparing to surrender to police, Taylor was shot “through the heart from behind” in front of her and her 14-year-old daughter Amy. Taylor’s stepson Carlin, 21, was indoors showering. Avery has called for an independent inquiry into what the family calls a “cold-blooded execution.”

Carlin had heard “about five or six shots. I looked outside and saw a cop aiming a rifle. It was an execution.” Amy told the media, “They didn’t even need to taser him—he’d surrendered. He had his hands in the air.”

Waikato Police District Commander Bruce Bird immediately dismissed the family’s account of what happened, telling a press conference that officers “were attacked” by Taylor, who had got “very close.” Bird claimed that the officers, who were not injured, “made the right decision.” He told NewstalkZB that a post mortem on June 11 showed that Taylor was shot as he

approached police and not in the back.

The Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA) announced it would investigate the shooting. The IPCA only has the power to gather evidence and make recommendations for disciplinary action, not to prosecute police officers, and it has a long record of siding with the police.

Police Association president Greg O’Connor said he was “fully supporting the officers involved in [the] fatal shooting in Paeroa.”

O’Connor, who has repeatedly demanded that police carry guns, asserted that “no one should criticise the judgment” of officers who decide it is necessary to kill. He told NewstalkZB that criticism of shootings was an “unreasonable response” and the public should “accept that police officers... will more and more be having to make these decisions.”

The killing of Taylor follows the shooting last year of David Cerven, a 21-year-old Slovakian national, in Myers Park, Auckland. Police announced in March they would not lay charges against two officers who killed Cerven, an apparently suicidal man who was unarmed.

Last September, police shot and killed 25-year-old Pera Smiler on a street in central Upper Hutt. Witnesses described the shooting as unnecessary. Smiler was armed with a rifle but evidently in a distressed and suicidal state.

As in the United States, where two people are killed by police every day, New Zealand police are being increasingly heavily armed. In 2008 the Labour Party government began arming police with Tasers. Last year Police Commissioner Mike Bush announced that all officers would have access to these extremely painful and dangerous 50,000-volt weapons. Following a decision in 2011, all police vehicles now carry pistols

and rifles.

The victims of police violence are typically poor, working class, and often mentally ill.

Avery and Taylor reportedly had no electricity at their property, where they raised horses and cattle. Taylor had been in prison when younger and had had numerous encounters with police. He was involved in a lengthy conflict with the Hauraki District Council over his attempt to block access to a public bicycle trail running through his property.

The Waikato region, including Paeroa, has been hit hard by New Zealand's economic crisis and there is widespread social distress. In 2012 there were reports of children in the region stealing in order to feed and clothe themselves. In 2013, Paeroa's official unemployment rate was 12.8 percent (more than double the national rate), and the median annual income was just \$19,800 (about \$10,000 less than the minimum wage for a full-time worker).

The miserable social conditions in Paeroa have fuelled the growth of criminal gangs, with frequent reports of large-scale "drug bust" operations by police. The town is heavily policed and for several years there has been a night-time curfew for teenagers.

In Waihi, not far from Paeroa, life is just as hard. There have been at least 70 job cuts at the town's Newmont gold mine since 2012. Over the same period, the Waikato region's Huntly East coal mine, run by the state-owned Solid Energy, has cut its workforce from 193 to 68 as well as eliminating dozens of contractors.

Chief Coroner Deborah Marshall reported last year that Waikato had the fifth highest suicide rate in the country, with 49 people taking their own lives in 2014–2015 and overall 354 since 2007. Last year a record 564 people took their own lives in New Zealand, according to official statistics.

In rural areas, suicides are often attributed to plummeting prices for dairy products, due to the global downturn. The government has done nothing to protect farmers, who are suffering from soaring levels of debt.

The tragic death of Mike Taylor, and the defence of the shooting by the police hierarchy, must be taken as a warning. The government's response to the worsening social crisis produced by its policies is to boost the prison system and give the police more weapons and powers. These are the methods that will be used in the future to intimidate and suppress the opposition and

resistance of workers to the continual attacks on their living standards.



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