

Police killing of mentally ill 66-year-old Bronx, New York woman sparks outrage

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Protests and widespread outrage followed the police murder of Deborah Danner, an elderly woman afflicted with schizophrenia, on Tuesday, October 18 in the New York City borough of the Bronx.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, newly installed Police Commissioner James O'Neill and other officials, moving to appease public anger, quickly called the killing "unacceptable." New York Police Department (NYPD) Sergeant Hugh Barry was stripped of his gun and badge and placed on modified duty pending an investigation. The case is being sent to the office of the Bronx District Attorney, Darcel Clark.

Barry and other cops arrived at the apartment building in which Ms. Danner lived at about 6 p.m. on October 18, in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, after neighbors reported a problem. One neighbor told the local press that the police had been there many times before, without any difficulty in assisting Danner. This time she was holding a scissors, which she was reportedly convinced to put down, but then she picked up a baseball bat. Barry, 30 years old and an eight-year veteran of the NYPD, discharged two shots from his service revolver, killing the elderly woman. Barry was equipped with a Taser, but did not use it.

"It is hard to imagine why five police officers and a patrol sergeant would need to use deadly force to disarm an elderly woman with a baseball bat," declared Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Ms. Danner's neighbors, well aware of her medical problems, were angry over her death, and deeply skeptical that the promised investigation would result in anything more than the usual whitewash of epidemic police abuse and violence directed against the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class. Scores of people marched to the 43rd police precinct to

protest on Tuesday night, blocking traffic on nearby streets.

The mayor said, "Deborah Danner should be alive right now, period." He said the police had not followed protocol in dealing with emotionally disturbed people, a conclusion also voiced by Commissioner O'Neill. De Blasio and O'Neill said that Barry should have waited for a specially trained Emergency Service Unit of the NYPD to arrive.

Edward Mullins, president of the Sergeants Benevolent Association, representing Barry, denounced the statements of the mayor and police commissioner as "political expediency." According to the report in the *New York Times*, Mullins said that Danner had swung the bat and that Barry was in fear for his life and those of others. He was also reported as saying, "Everyone agrees that this was a good shooting," adding, "We could be sitting here talking about how a 66-year-old fractured his skull."

A report in the *New York Post* revealed that Barry has been named in two lawsuits alleging brutal police beatings of African-American or Latino men. In one of them, 25-year-old Gregory Peters charged that Barry and other cops beat him with their fists, feet or batons in Times Square on August 22, 2010, and that the police displayed racial animus. The suit was settled for \$25,000 in 2012.

The death of Ms. Danner was made all the more significant and disturbing by her own statements, in a six-page essay she wrote some four years ago, which she submitted to an attorney for the state's Mental Hygiene Legal Service who was then representing her in a case involving legal guardianship. "We are all aware of the all too frequent news stories about the mentally ill who come up against law enforcement instead of mental health professionals and end up

dead,” she wrote at that time, eloquently and also prophetically.

Once again, this latest police killing is being portrayed in some quarters, including the media, in exclusively racial terms. In fact, cases of mentally ill whites and people of all ethnicities being shot by the police are commonly reported all over the US.

Official statistics put the number of calls for assistance in dealing with the emotionally disturbed in New York City at 128,000 so far in 2016. The huge and growing number is at least partly a reflection of social circumstances, both the hopelessness of the most impoverished and the abysmal shortage of adequate mental health treatment. New York City cops are supposed to receive training in dealing with the mentally ill, but officials acknowledged that only 4,400 out of the 36,000 officers on the New York force had received such instruction.

The killing of Deborah Danner recalled the death in almost identical circumstances of another elderly Bronx woman, Eleanor Bumpurs, 32 years ago. Police were called to the victim’s apartment in the west Bronx after she fell four months behind in her rent and reportedly resisted attempts to evict her. In that case also the cops claimed that they feared for their lives at the hands of a mentally ill woman in her late 60s. The fate of Eleanor Bumpurs provoked anger and protests not only in New York but elsewhere as well. The police officer who was eventually charged with manslaughter was acquitted in 1987.

The rich also have their share of the emotionally disturbed, but only very rarely are they reported as the victims of police shootings. It is not a matter of training, but of the role of the police force itself. It is the lives of the poorest sections of the working class, of all races, that are considered expendable by the capitalist state and its armed men.



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