Bakersfield, California police shoot unarmed 73-year-old man

Shannon Jones
16 December 2016

The shooting this week in Bakersfield, California of Francisco Serna, an unarmed 73-year-old man suffering from dementia, is the latest horrifying episode in the continuing wave of police violence in the United States.

The family of Serna said the father of five children left his house late Sunday night for a walk. Shortly afterwards he was shot multiple times by a police officer who claimed he would not take his hands out of his pockets. Afterwards police say they recovered a faux wooden crucifix from the man's body, but no gun.

Some 150 people participated in a candlelight vigil Tuesday in Bakersfield to protest the killing of Serna. The family of the slain man is demanding a state and federal investigation. "It is difficult to accept that our dad's life ended so brutally, abruptly and with such excessive violence," the family said in a statement. "Our dad was treated like a criminal."

The family spokesman, Cyndi Imperial, said the police treated the family with callous indifference. "Police prevented Francisco's wife Rubia and daughter Laura to check on him even when they asked to be allowed to be next to him just to hold his hand," she said.

Family members only learned that Francisco had died from "social media and the 5 o'clock news," Imperial noted.

Serna had worked at a cotton gin in McFarland, California for many years. He had retired in the mid-2000s. About eight years ago, he moved to Bakersfield to be closer to his children. He lived with his wife and one of his daughters.

According to the police account of events, Serna approached a neighbor and her friend around 12:30am Monday as they were unloading the friend's car. The man was acting strangely and they were frightened. The friend drove off while the neighbor ran inside her house and contacted police, thinking the man might have a gun.

Again, according to police, when about six officers arrived Serna refused to take his hands out of his pockets and continued walking toward them. When Serna was 15–20 feet away, one of the officers, Reagan Selman, opened fire. Police admitted that Serna never lunged at or threatened officers.

Rogelio Serna, the victim's son, said the older Serna had showed signs of dementia since 2015 and occasionally experienced delusions. His condition had gotten worse in the last month.

A recording of the call by the police dispatcher shows that police were alerted beforehand that Serna suffered from dementia. Police had visited the home several times in the past when Serna became confused and activated a medical alarm.

A neighbor interviewed by local ABC News reporters said, "They killed that man for absolutely no reason." Serna's daughter told ABC, "They all knew this was a man with dementia and my father gets killed. It's inexcusable... The BPD [Bakersfield Police Department] needs to be held accountable because this is happening to too many people."

The shooting of Serna continues an epidemic of police violence, which to date has claimed the lives of 912 people in the US this year, according to the *Washington Post*. The relentless procession of police killings crosses all ethnic and geographic boundaries.

On Thursday, a former Milwaukee police officer, Dominique Heaggan-Brown, was charged with murder in the death of Sylville Smith last August. Smith was lying on the ground when he was shot by the officer in the chest. The killing sparked days of angry protests in the city. Smith was African-American, as is Heaggan-Brown.

While Smith was initially armed, he had thrown his gun away before he was fatally shot. A video taken by police body cameras show that at the time Heaggan-Brown fired the fatal shot, Smith had his hands near his head.

Indictments of police officers are rare, and the

© World Socialist Web Site

conviction of a police officer is even less common. Philip Stinson, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University, told the Associated Press that he knew of only one cop convicted of murder by a jury for an on-duty shooting since he began compiling statistics in 2005. During that same period there have been multiple thousands shot and killed by police, many victims unarmed.

In Reno, Nevada 14-year-old Logan Clark remains in extremely critical condition in a medically induced coma after being shot December 7 in the chest by a campus police officer at his high school.

Campus officers said the boy, who was white, was wielding a large knife (which turned out to be two dull butter knives). According to the boy's father, Justin Clark, the youth had been punched hard several times in the face by an upperclassman just before the shooting. Cell phone video taken by classmates seconds before the cop fired show that Justin's mouth had indeed been bloodied.

"My son wasn't a knife wielding psychopath," said Logan's father, "He wanted to make sure he wasn't beat up and robbed."

A friend of the family pointed out that the shooting took place in the midst of a crowd of students, who could have been hit by the officer's bullet. "They should actually be writing formal apologies to every single student's parents there for putting all their children in danger."

Supporters of the shooting victim have collected a petition with over 1,000 signatures decrying the use of lethal force. A group of 100 classmates, family and friends marched two miles to school district headquarters to deliver the petition. Meanwhile, police and school officials have praised the actions of the officer involved.

Other recent police shootings include:

• December 12, Kenneth Robaldo, a 28-year-old black man in Philadelphia who police say was armed with a gun and was wanted on an arrest warrant.

• December 11, Jose Angel Vallarta, a 30-year-old Hispanic man in Laredo, Texas. Police were called to his house after a report of domestic violence. They say Vallarta had a knife.

• December 11, Timothy Case, race not recorded, shot in Lincoln, Nebraska. Police were called to a hospital where the man reportedly had threatened staff with a knife.

• December 10, Samson Varner, a 36-year-old white male from Greenwood, Indiana who police say was armed with a knife and refused police orders to drop it.

The continued police shootings across the United States point to deep and festering social tensions. The city of Bakersfield has been hammered by the slump in the oil industry, a product of the collapse in petroleum prices. Bakersfield and surrounding Kern County is the largest oil producing area in the United States, making up 10 percent of US oil production. Widespread layoffs have decimated employment in the oil industry, impacting sales tax collections and school and municipal budgets.

A report issued earlier this year cited Bakersfield as a US city with a high level of concentrated poverty, with 32 percent of residents living in what are defined as "extremely poor" neighborhoods where the poverty rate is 40 percent or greater. This is nearly double the pre-2008 level of 17 percent.

What is happening in Bakersfield is happening all across the US, where there has been no recovery from the 2008 financial crisis and where levels of social inequality are rising as wages and incomes fall and stagnate. These conditions will only be aggravated when the administration of Donald Trump takes office in January. Trump is pledging to dismantle what remains of social programs while opposing protests against police violence and pledging full support to the cops in their murderous attacks on workers and youth.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site