

Australia: Victorian police assault disability pensioner

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The *Age* newspaper yesterday released footage showing a vicious police assault on an unwell disability pensioner. Six police officers attacked the man, identified only as John, outside his home in the Melbourne suburb of Preston in September 2017.

Screened on television and the Internet by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the footage shows the helpless man being violently thrown to the ground, repeatedly beaten and sprayed with capsicum gas, before being handcuffed and subjected to a humiliating water hosing.

The incident underscores the impunity with which police officers brutalise working class people, especially youth and the poor and vulnerable, and graphically demonstrates the consequences of the build-up of police forces by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

The *Age* and ABC reported that the disabled man's health carers had contacted the police, asking them to check on him. He was reportedly ill as a result of withdrawal from medication prescribed after back surgery and is in cancer remission. The carers said he was increasingly depressed and anxious.

Police dispatch notes given to the officers reportedly claimed that John could confront them in an attempt to provoke the police into shooting him. This was apparently based on a minor assault charge a decade earlier, and the fact that he suffered mental health issues.

When John pleaded for the police to leave him alone, they allegedly threatened to break his door down. He told them he had diarrhea and had been vomiting blood.

Police later claimed that when he opened the door, John approached the officers with fists raised, and that their response was proportionate. The footage, captured by a CCTV system John had installed, paints a different

picture. It shows an officer immediately approaching John with a canister of pepper spray.

John was violently dragged to the ground by five police officers. He was held down, face first, by three of them, while two other officers began beating him. One repeatedly struck John's lower leg with his baton. The other drove his elbow into the disabled man's back.

An officer then discharged capsicum spray centimetres from John's face. The recording captures the officer saying, "F--king idiot, do you like that? You like that? Smells good doesn't it."

After trussing John in handcuffs, the officers turned a garden hose on his face, at maximum pressure. When the hose was turned off, John asked: "You happy? How tough are youse?" He was repeatedly hosed again. One officer encouraged his colleague to turn the water back on, while he laughed and filmed the scene with a camera phone.

In an interview, John told the ABC's "7:30" television program: "He's aiming for my nostrils and it's going into my lungs—and that's when I started choking from the water and from the hot mace going into my respiratory [system]." He added: "I couldn't breathe. I really thought I was going to drown."

John had not been charged with any crime. He has launched a civil action against the police and lodged a complaint with the state government's public sector "watchdog," the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAB).

Victoria Police assistant commissioner Luke Cornelius told a media conference this morning the officers involved would not be stood down. He touted internal police investigation procedures, which almost invariably clear officers of any wrongdoing. In a signal that the state Labor government will back another

police whitewash, no government minister has publicly commented on the footage.

Lawyers quoted by the *Age*, including Jeremy King, a solicitor who specialises in civil cases against police brutality, said the actions against John were not unusual. The difference in his case was that the police assault was caught on film.

The Fairfax-owned publication cited IBAB statistics showing that, in 2015, less than 10 percent of more than 350 complaints investigated by the internal police review were upheld. The figure was less than 4 percent in cases involving allegations of police brutality.

The *Age* also documented the 2012 police assault of Jesse Scarlett Rhodes, a mother of two children, in Sunbury, another working class Melbourne suburb. Rhodes and her husband were confronted by police in a laneway. The couple reported that Rhodes was thrown to the ground, violently assaulted and thrown head-first into a police van, while her husband was arrested.

After Rhodes made a complaint to the police internal affairs unit, the officers involved in the altercation issued statements accusing her of assault. She was pressured into providing a formal apology to avoid the possibility of a conviction.

A civil suit filed by Rhodes and her husband resulted in a finding, last year, that police used “disproportionate force” and behaved in a “disgraceful” manner that could have caused “significant injury.”

Victorian police have also been accused of other recent acts of extreme violence.

Last July, police shot Dale Ewins and Zita Sukys at a “swingers event” in a Melbourne nightclub. Police claimed they received reports that Ewins was carrying a gun. Security guards from the nightclub, however, said they told police the gun was a replica, and was part of a costume. Ewins and Sukys were shot while performing a sex act. Ewins claimed he was also tasered and beaten. The couple has initiated legal action, alleging the police inflicted “assault and battery.”

Police brutality has been reported across the country. In one New South Wales (NSW) case, currently the subject of a Law Enforcement Conduct Commission hearing, four officers beat a naked 16-year-old boy, reportedly under the influence of drugs, in the town of Byron Bay this January. Footage taken by a member of the public shows him pinned to the ground calling for

help, while an officer strikes him almost 20 times with his baton.

That incident followed three fatal police shootings in NSW in just five weeks during last July and August. Each of the victims suffered mental health issues.

The increasing incidence of police violence and killings is a graphic expression of a broader build-up of the repressive state apparatus, and an assault on democratic rights targeting the working class.

The policies of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, at both state and federal levels, have resulted in a deepening social crisis, with wages and living conditions falling. The authorities have responded by dramatically increasing police numbers and expanding their powers, in order to suppress rising discontent.

The Victorian Labor government announced last December that it would recruit an additional 3,100 police officers over four years, increasing the total number by 20 percent. The government’s \$2 billion “law and order” project includes new police stations, three new police helicopters and a plane, and a \$27 million training base for the paramilitary Special Operations Group.

The Labor government has also moved to increase sentences and parole eligibility requirements, including for juveniles, accompanied by an hysterical media campaign alleging, without any evidence, that Melbourne is in the grip of an epidemic of crime by “African gangs.”



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