

Australian workers and youth condemn police assault on disabled pensioner

Our reporters
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There is widespread outrage over a brutal police assault on a mentally ill man in the front garden of his home in Melbourne, Victoria. Graphic video footage broadcast this week showed the distressed man being dragged to the ground by six police officers, repeatedly batoned on the legs, capsicum-sprayed in the face at close range, and then further humiliated by being hosed with water three times.

This incident is clearly part of a wider pattern. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program on Tuesday night broadcast additional footage of police violence, including a sustained assault on a 23-year-old man suffering a psychotic episode. CCTV footage showed the young man face down on the ground being repeatedly punched in the head, then being stomped on his back.

WSWS reporters spoke with workers and youth in Footscray, a working-class suburb in Melbourne's west with many Vietnamese and African families. For months, the city's western suburbs have been at the centre of a sensationalised and racist campaign by the corporate media and the state Labor government about an "epidemic of crime" by supposed "African gangs."

This campaign is feeding into a massive buildup of the police force to deal with social unrest. Last December, the state government announced a \$2 billion funding increase to the police, including a 20 percent increase in officer numbers, new police stations, and a training base for a paramilitary special operations group.

Sharon, a disability pensioner, told the WSWS: "Police shouldn't have the authority to bash someone who just wants to be left alone. People with a disability can't even defend themselves. I've had experiences from police and some of my ex-partners. One of my partners was bashed and beaten in a room by the police

and another partner had a terrible experience where the police used police dogs against him—he has scars on his face from the dogs. He put in a complaint to the police but nothing happened."

Sharon spoke about the rise of police violence internationally. "I think the police shootings anywhere, in the US or Australia, are disgusting," she explained. "It's not their job to attack children and people like they do. Every service we have is supposed to help us, but instead we get cuts to health, housing and the police get all the money. They have more authority over people and do what they want. We will probably end up as bad as America."

Sharon continued: "There are cuts to health services, it's hard to get a job, and there are so many people living on the street in the city. It is really getting bad. I am waiting for public housing myself. Instead of the government buying new land for housing, they are selling everything off for privatisation.

"There are now whole families who are on the street, or living in cars. If the police see a family in a car at night, they knock on the window, say 'move on'—but where are they supposed to go? You go to emergency services, they're not any help, there are too many people looking for help because the government cuts all their funding all the time.

"We are the little guinea pigs in this world, saying 'yes sir no sir,' all the time. We're never listened to at all. The major parties say 'we will do this and that' to get our vote, but it is all a lie."

Ahmed, an unemployed worker, originally from Eritrea, commented: "If you're talking about democracy then there shouldn't be police violence. You see this in America—where is the democracy and public service? They attacked this disabled man here for no reason. The police have to follow the laws and

the courts, but they don't respect the law."

Manon, a university student from France, visiting Australia on a holiday break, said: "There's a lot of police violence in France. I don't trust the police. When people get killed, they suddenly can't explain it. Police cover up for the police. In France they use terrorists to make people feel fearful. Having more police is not the solution."

Manon spoke about growing social inequality. "There is too much space between rich and poor," she said. "We should reduce the rich people's salary and raise all the others' salaries. The train drivers [in France] are on strike because the government wants to get rid of their conditions. All that is thought about is profit."

Manon said there was "no difference" between French President Emmanuel Macron and neo-fascist National Front leader Marine Le Pen, nor was there between Donald Trump and his Democratic Party rival Hillary Clinton.

"Macron is the baby of the rich people. They promoted him just because he's young. They're two terrible people, we think we're in democracy, we just vote for someone to decide, but it's not fair. Our voting system isn't correct, because the two candidates are of no interest to anyone, but they keep this system around."

Mary, an experienced mental health clinician, said: "When I saw the footage [of the disability pensioner being assaulted], I'd like to say I was shocked by what I saw, but I wasn't. Because the disproportionate use of force by police is not uncommon. What's different about this is only that it's been caught on video."

"Emergency department staff, clinicians, nurses and doctors, all often have to deal with people who are in a highly distressed state, and at times even physically violent, and they don't resort to capsicum spraying people in their eyes. There are other ways that you can restrain or contain somebody. The use of capsicum spray as a response, when you had six police officers at the man's front door, is disproportionate. There was absolutely no reason for him to be blasted in the face with a hose at full pressure in such a dehumanising and undignified manner. It's brutal and disgusting."

Mary explained the impact of government underfunding for mental health services. "My understanding is that following a coroner's inquest into the police killing of a young boy at a skate park, one

recommendation was to have mental health clinicians available to be called on by police if needed in assessing people in an emergency situation. Now all mental health services in hospitals have a clinician available to attend an actual scene where somebody may be, or go to a police station, or just be available on the phone to provide information that might be critical about the person.

"But the funding for these services is limited—my understanding is the funding is only available for one clinician per mental health service area, and only for an afternoon shift. So it's not staffed 24 hours, 7 days a week. Each area covers many suburbs, with populations of hundreds of thousands, but you'll have just one mental health clinician who can respond to calls. There are often multiple calls at once, so if the clinician is already tied up dealing with one situation, they can't respond to any further calls that come in..."

"There are always staff shortages in the hospitals. It is very difficult to fully staff these sort of acute, front-line response roles. Many services are short-staffed every day. The government funnels extra money into building up the state, the police, with lots more funding for police. They don't put more into hospital staff, mental health resources, and community support services."



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