

Australia: Mentally-ill man shot dead by police at his home

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Last Wednesday night, Todd McKenzie, a 40-year-old man diagnosed with schizophrenia, was fatally shot by police inside his home in Taree, on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales (NSW).

Police arrived on the scene at 1:15 p.m., after a neighbour reported seeing McKenzie on his veranda holding a knife. The street was cordoned off, and police maintained a siege for nine hours, during which McKenzie, alone inside the locked house, gave no indication that he presented a threat to the public.

McKenzie's uncle, Ron Wilkins, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Todd's stepfather "went to the policeman in charge and said that he wanted to go in and talk to him, and felt sure he would be able to talk him around. He's had plenty of experience doing that sort of thing [as a Department of Child Services officer for some years]. The cops refused, [they] said they'd handle it their way."

At 10:15 p.m., five police entered the house. Initial attempts to subdue McKenzie with a Taser allegedly failed, leading the "tactical officers" to open fire. While Assistant Commissioner Max Mitchell refused to discuss specific details of the shooting, neighbours reported hearing five gunshots.

When asked about Mitchell's claim that the decision to forcibly enter the house was based on "concern for [the] welfare of this individual armed with a knife inside the house," Wilkins said: "He was locked in his house, no-one was with him. It was impossible for him to harm anyone else. If he was left alone, he would calm down and he would come out of it, even if it took a couple of days. Better than shooting him down like a bloody dog."

McKenzie's shooting is all the more tragic as, by all accounts, he had been managing his condition well in recent years. Wilkins told the WSW: "In the last few

years, he's been kicking goals. His mother was very happy with the way he was going. He'd got his [driver's] licence, saved up a couple of grand from his [disability support] pension and bought an old Camry. His mental episodes became less frequent."

Speaking to reporters, McKenzie's aunt Francene Reo said: "If there was no danger to the public, and if he was contained in his own house and not doing anything, one would have to ask 'why in the hell is he gone?'"

Reo questioned whether the police operation outside McKenzie's home was conducted "in a manner which is likely to defray fear and paranoia, or [whether police were] behaving in a way which [was] likely to escalate those problems."

The "tactical officers" sent to deal with mental health incidents are part of the State Protection Group, an arm of the NSW Counter Terrorism and Special Tactics Command. The deployment of counter-terrorist forces to storm the house of a man undergoing a schizophrenic episode seems guaranteed to enhance his fear and paranoia, and clearly shows the attitude of the state to the mentally-ill.

Reo also made clear that her nephew's horrific shooting was far from unprecedented. She said: "It's something that historically has been happening again and again and again. You have somebody who has an acknowledged mental health problem, and they have an incident, and they end up dead. There is no excuse for it."

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" news program reported in 2018 that of the 35 people fatally shot by police in NSW between 1997 and 2017, at least 19, or more than half, were suffering from a mental illness.

In August 2017, Ian Fackender was killed by police

inside his Bathurst home. Overdue for a court-ordered medical treatment for his schizophrenia, the 47-year-old father of six had not responded to phone calls from his family and mental health services, and the police were called to intervene. They found Fackender lying in bed with a sword by his side. After two failed attempts to subdue the startled man with a Taser, Fackender was shot five times.

Barely a month earlier, Danukul Mokmool, a 30-year-old man with a history of mental illness and drug addiction, was killed by police near Sydney's Central Station. Although Mokmool was clearly distressed, and armed only with a pair of scissors, police responded with lethal force, shooting him four times in the head and chest.

Courtney Topic, a 22-year-old woman with a "major depressive disorder of moderate severity," and possible undiagnosed schizophrenia, was killed by police in 2015 within 41 seconds of their arrival outside a fast-food restaurant where she had been seen pacing and mumbling to herself, holding a knife.

Like McKenzie, Topic had given no indication that she intended to harm police or anyone else. She was standing motionless until one of the officers attacked her with capsicum spray.

The coronial inquest into Topic's death was a white-wash, issuing only the oft-repeated call for "better training" and more resources for police.

After the Taree killing, Assistant Commissioner Mitchell was quick to proclaim that the "tactical officer" who fired on McKenzie was "highly trained and highly skilled"—refuting the assertions that greater training will reduce the instances of police shooting mentally-ill individuals.

The claim that NSW Police lack the resources to improve their handling of such incidents is a sham. The force had a declared budget of \$3.9 billion budget for 2018–19. In the same period only \$2.1 billion was spent on mental health in NSW.

When police are called to incidents involving people with mental illnesses, their presence serves to inflame rather than defuse the situation. McKenzie and Fackender were both killed after police stormed their homes. It was the use of capsicum spray that provoked Topic and Mokmool to run toward police, leading the officers to shoot in alleged "self-defence."

The repeated incidents of police killing mentally ill

people is a sharp manifestation of a broader crisis in mental health care in NSW.

Decades of funding cuts by both Labor and Liberal governments have decimated mental health services. The 1983 Richmond Report, commissioned by the NSW Labor government, recommended the closure of mental institutions across the state, forcing many people with mental illnesses into homelessness, dilapidated boarding-houses, or prison.

Given the lack of places at specialised mental health facilities, hospital emergency departments, already overcrowded and under-resourced, are increasingly having to cope with patients undergoing psychotic episodes resulting from mental illness and drug addiction.

This has contributed to a rise in violent attacks on paramedics and hospital staff—currently there are about 40 such assaults each month in NSW.

Last week thousands of workers from public hospitals across the state engaged in a four-hour stoppage to demand increased security to prevent such attacks.

In the recent trial of a Sydney man charged with stabbing his five-year-old son, the court heard that the man, who was taking anti-psychotic medication for schizophrenia, had attempted to check himself into a mental health facility two days before the stabbing but was turned away due to a shortage of beds.

Far from any serious attempt to improve mental health services, or address any of the other social crises confronting the working class, the response of the state is the continued build-up of the police force.

Already marginalised by decades of neglect, the mentally-ill are merely the first victims of the turn to police state measures, which are ultimately aimed at repressing mounting social opposition and anger from the working class.



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