

New York City police kill five in less than a month

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New York City police have shot and killed five people in the past month, a graphic illustration of the deepening social crisis, as well as the preparations for stepped-up attacks on the entire working class.

The most recent incident took place in a Brownsville nail salon on October 25, when police opened fire on a man who they said was violently attempting to prevent an arrest. The victim was Kwesi Ashun, shot and killed after he hit a police officer in the head with a metal chair, according to official accounts. The cop was hospitalized in critical but stable condition.

Only two days earlier, Victor Hernandez, 29, the superintendent of an apartment building in Harlem, was shot and killed after he apparently suffered some sort of mental breakdown. A resident of the building called police after she saw him, completely naked and behaving erratically, in the hallway. When the police arrived they said that Hernandez pointed a gun at them. They fired 17 rounds, hitting Hernandez with 10 bullets.

Hernandez, the father of a son and daughter who grew up near the Crotona Park area in the East Bronx, was engaged in a bitter custody dispute with his ex-wife, which may account in part for his behavior. Family members said he was a devoted father. The building resident who called the police said afterwards, according to an account in the *New York Times*, that he had been screaming for about 20 minutes. “I did not want him dead,” she said. “I just wanted to find out what was going on.”

Hernandez’s mother, who is herself a police officer, said, “Just know Victor was a kind, gentle soul. And my entire world.” Neighbors and friends said they had never known him to be anything but sane and helpful. “My brother could do so many things, and it was always clear to me that he was destined for greatness,”

said the victim’s sister. “Unfortunately, he’ll never get to use any of his many skills.”

On September 29, a police officer was killed by “friendly fire” as another suspect was gunned down, in the first of the current string of police killings. More recently, on October 17, a man was shot dead after a traffic stop on Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx, just one block from the busy Montefiore Medical Center complex that dominates the neighborhood. On that occasion, plainclothes cops pulled over an SUV whose driver was not wearing a seatbelt. They discovered outstanding warrants, and the driver, according to their account, began to physically resist arrest. He was shot and killed, after which the police say that found cocaine and heroin in the van.

On October 15, Nasheem Prioleau, just released from prison after serving five years on a robbery conviction, was seen shooting at another man near Brooklyn’s Gowanus public housing project and was shot dead by police as his intended victim fled, according to the account from the NYPD. The police claim they identified themselves and told Prioleau to drop his weapon, but that instead he aimed the gun at them. Prioleau was later identified as a member of the Bloods street gang with 13 previous arrests.

In this, as in most of the other incidents, there are no witnesses other than the cops. A neighborhood anti-gang activist was quoted as saying, “We just want to get the facts,” expressing some concern about police “excessively shooting.”

Deputy Police Chief Kevin Maloney said, in response to the latest incidents, “It’s high in the last couple of weeks, but it’s part of where we’ve been consistent in the last couple of years.” Maloney pointed to the fact that there had been “only” 10 victims of the police so far in 2019. His callous comment should be compared

to the official mourning, led by the mayor, that takes place on the rare occasions when police are victims.

According to a report in the online *Brooklyn Eagle*, only 12 of the 52 police killings that have taken place since the death of Eric Garner in 2014 provoked such widespread anger over police brutality have been investigated by New York's Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB). This official body, supposedly a recourse to obtain justice in the face of such abuse, can only initiate a probe after a complaint has been made. The generally toothless city agency was established more than 65 years ago and has no power to do anything but recommend punishments. Many families of victims do not even know the procedure for filing complaints. So far in 2019, the number of complaints is about 5,000, an increase of 20 percent over 2018.

The number of murders in the city for 2019 stands at 249 through October 6, compared to an almost identical number of 246 for the same period last year. While the crime rate in New York City remains near historic lows, however, the incidents of police abuse are increasing and police killings continue at the same pace as previously.

The plainclothes police of the elite "anti-crime" units are heavily involved in the police shootings. Most of the killings are of criminal suspects or the mentally ill, but there have been some even more outrageous incidents. Just last week the city announced a settlement in the killing of John Collado, a "good Samaritan" who had been trying to break up a fight on the street in upper Manhattan when an undercover narcotics detective fatally shot him in the stomach without a word being said. The detective, James Connolly, was later promoted to sergeant. The widow of the victim filed a federal lawsuit, and the city agreed to a \$5.5 million settlement, eight years after the fact.

Behind the ongoing and increasing number of shootings is the undoubted rise in social tension in the city, the product of unprecedented social inequality, along with decaying social conditions and infrastructure affecting the working-class majority. While every week sees the completion of yet another luxury high-rise tower in which apartments sell for far more than most workers will earn in their entire lifetimes, there has been no economic recovery for millions since the financial crash of 2008. The tension

is not yet reflected in crime statistics, but is manifested in such social indices as fare evasion, the relentless rise in homelessness and the epidemic of untreated mental illness—and also in the actions of the police.

One of the Ballot Questions to be voted up or down on Election Day next week will amend the New York City Charter to increase the size of the CCRB and to institute several changes in its powers, including the requirement that the Police Commissioner "provide the CCRB with a written explanation when the Police Commissioner intends to depart or has departed from discipline recommended by the CCRB ..."

This measure, while it is expected to pass, will do virtually nothing to change the conditions facing the working class. The role of the police is to enforce the rule of the plutocracy and every form of misery that flows from it. They operate and are psychologically prepared to function as a virtual occupation force in poor working-class neighborhoods. Hence the readiness of the cops, when confronted by the symptoms of the social crisis, to shoot first and ask questions later.



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