

New Zealand Police fatally shoot man in rural town

Chris Ross

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New Zealand Police fatally shot Graeme Sydney Warren, 66, on December 5 in Kurow, a small town of just 300 people in the Waitake District of the South Island.

Warren was a popular fishing guide with locals and tourists with no police record. Local cafe owner Kate White said the “town is really shocked, there’s no history there so nobody has any idea why this has happened.” White told *Newshub* that he “brought joy to everyone’s life” and the incident was out-of-character.

One of Warren’s neighbours told the *Otago Daily Times* that he was “a great guy... He was a very quiet guy and very nice guy to talk to. There was nothing out of the ordinary about him at all. I never thought anything like that would happen. I could not speak any more highly of him.”

Acting Southern District Commander Inspector Darryl Sweeny claimed that Warren held a weapon at officers and made suicide threats. On December 5, a rural officer was dispatched to his property at 9.05 p.m., three more officers arrived around 10.50 p.m. Warren was shot at 11.50 p.m. even before the Armed Offenders Squad (AOS) and a negotiation team from Dunedin could arrive.

Warren was given medical attention and flown to Dunedin Hospital, but later died in the early hours of the morning.

Emile Rakete from the protest group, People Against Prisons Aotearoa, said that if police cannot “handle these situations without killing that person, they have no business being first responders.”

Police Association president Chris Cahill lashed out, denouncing this criticism as “offensive.” He blamed the country’s underfunded mental health system for turning the police into first-responders for people suffering mental health issues and crises.

Cahill told *Newshub*: “When you’re confronted with an armed gunman, who’s suffering severe mental health

issues, it’s an incredibly dangerous situation.”

Precise details of how the incident unfolded remain unclear. But the presence of armed police officers with weapons drawn and a man suffering a mental health crisis and making suicidal threats, raises disturbing questions.

The Minister of Police Stuart Nash and Police Commissioner Mike Bush each made public statements emphasising support for Warren’s family but implying that the shooting was justified. Nash said a family member had apparently called police fearing Warren would kill himself, but “circumstances changed rapidly and police were then confronted with a firearm.”

The Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA) will carry out a routine investigation that will almost certainly protect the officers involved. The IPCA is part of the same state apparatus as the police with the authority to gather evidence and make disciplinary recommendations but not prosecute officers.

The IPCA exonerated officers of any criminal responsibility in the fatal shooting of 29-year-old man Jerrim Toms on March 31, 2018 who suffered from bipolar disorder. Toms allegedly carried a machete towards officers who shot him twice in the chest, then eight more times as he attempted to flee, with some bullets hitting him in the back. This killing was declared “justified.”

In 2015, 21-year-old David Cerven, also possibly suicidal, was shot dead by police in Auckland. He was unarmed. In 2016, police shot and killed 57-year-old Mike Taylor during a domestic callout in Paeroa. His partner claimed he had been shot in the back while trying to surrender. In both cases, the IPCA exonerated the police.

Shootings by police are becoming an increasingly regular occurrence in New Zealand. On December 17, parents and children hid in cupboards after Flaxmere Primary School in Hastings. The school was placed in

lockdown for over an hour while police were called following reports of a large man arguing with a teacher about access to a school classroom.

Officers announced through a megaphone that the man was carrying a gun. He was shot once and taken to hospital in serious condition. Police told the media the following day that the man was armed with an imitation pistol, but was not threatening staff or children when he was shot. A police spokesperson dismissively told Radio NZ it was “hard to know” whether the man was intending to harm someone.

These shootings occur within the context of the increasing militarisation of the police by the current Labour-NZ First-Greens government, which promised to recruit 1,800 new officers when it came to power on October 26, 2017.

Last month police launched new Armed Response Teams (ARTs) in three districts: the Canterbury region including Christchurch; the Waikato, including Flaxmere; and Counties Manukau in working-class South Auckland. These will be trialed before the eventual roll-out nationwide, a step towards arming all police officers.

The Mental Health Foundation opposed the ARTs, warning that mentally ill people were disproportionately shot and tasered by police.

The Labour-led government has cynically exploited the mass shooting in Christchurch in March by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant, who murdered 51 Muslim people and injured 50, using a military-type semi-automatic rifle, to strengthen the state’s anti-democratic powers. This includes more heavily-armed police, greater funding for the intelligence agencies, and a push by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for greater internet censorship, in the name of combating “extremism.”

In reality, these measures are part of preparations by the New Zealand ruling elite to suppress working-class opposition to worsening social inequality, poverty and other social scourges created by capitalism.



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