

Police fatally shoot Aboriginal man in Sydney

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There is significant anger among ordinary people over the fatal shooting of an Aboriginal man by police in western Sydney on November 9. The incident is the latest instance of police violence, with an increasing resort to deadly force during confrontations that could have been peacefully de-escalated.

Stanley Russell was shot several times at a family home in the suburb of Seven Hills. Officers from the local Blacktown police area command claimed that Russell confronted them with an axe and knife. No evidence, however, has been presented to corroborate the presence of the weapons, or that they were in Russell's possession. Police camera footage has not been made available.

Four New South Wales (NSW) police officers arrived at the house shortly before 11:30 am to serve a warrant on Russell. Within minutes he was dead. Neighbours reported hearing up to five shots. Police reportedly administered CPR, but at 11:51 am, with paramedics on the scene, Russell was declared dead.

There is little first-hand evidence to establish the exact sequence of events, which remains murky.

The shooting took place at the home of Russell's aunt, Pam, where he was staying. Pam reportedly answered the door, and police asked for Russell. She was "ordered" to remain outside. Don Craigie, Stanley Russell's uncle, has told the media Pam reported that there was no axe at the house. After being shut out of her home, she heard gunshots and was prevented from re-entering the house.

Following the tragedy, no knife or axe has been presented as evidence. Frequently, after violent incidents, police parade weapons before the press. In many police shootings, hazy and uncorroborated assertions that the victim possessed a weapon have been used to justify the use of deadly violence.

Since the killing of Russell, the response of the police has been to offer assurances that his death is being

investigated by a police Critical Incident Investigation team. This is being used to suppress evidence relating to the tragedy, on the grounds that it remains under investigation.

Such an in-house investigation will inevitably result in a whitewash. Time and time again, internal investigations, involving the police supposedly scrutinising their own conduct, have asserted that there was no alternative but to use lethal force, even when this was clearly not the case.

The death of Stanley Russell compounds the tragedy of his family.

Edward Russell, Stanley's older brother, died in custody in 1999 at Sydney's Long Bay jail, in circumstances which were entirely preventable. Edward was a known suicide risk, and he was left with material with which he could commit suicide. As with other deaths in custody, there has been no satisfactory inquiry or resolution to Edward's death.

Helen Russell, Stanley's mother, said: "Stanley's older brother Edward died ... because the NSW prison system failed completely in its duty of care to Edward." The same can be said of the failure of a duty of care to Stanley Russell. Helen made the basic point, reported by NITV news, that "They didn't have to shoot him ... They could've used a taser on him or capsicum spray."

The killing of Stanley Russell is a concentrated expression of the conditions facing the Aboriginal population, one of the most vulnerable and oppressed sections of the working class. Social problems, caused by brutal government policies, which have left most Aboriginal people in poverty, are met with state violence. In Russell's case, his family described him as a "good man" who suffered various social issues, including mental health problems connected with sexual abuse as a child.

While there is no question that Aboriginal people are disproportionately targeted for police violence, the ever-

greater turn of state authorities to brutal methods is fundamentally a class question.

This is demonstrated by the broader record of fatal police shootings, in which the common denominator is that the victims were almost invariably poor, working class and/or suffered mental health issues.

In 2018, an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7:30" program reported 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.

Nationally, a 2013 Australian Institute of Criminology study found that police fatally shot 105 people between 1989 and 2011. At least 42 percent of the victims suffered a mental illness. The most common issue was schizophrenia.

Numerous tragic cases could be cited in which the actions of police can be described only as state murder.

In 2015, Courtney Topic, who had Asperger's syndrome, was in a disoriented state at a fast food takeaway in a working-class western Sydney suburb. She was sipping coffee, and carrying a kitchen knife. Within seconds of police arriving, she was fatally shot.

In 2017, Danukul Mokmool, a 30-year-old man with a history of mental illness and drug addiction, who had also grown up in poverty in western Sydney, was killed by police near 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.

In 2019, Todd McKenzie, diagnosed with schizophrenia, was shot by police after a nine-hour standoff at his own home in the mid-north coast of NSW. McKenzie was not a threat to anyone, but efforts to de-escalate the situation were not conducted.

In all these instances, the police have faced no repercussions.

The WSWS explained in examining the case of Todd McKenzie: "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.

"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."

This build-up is continuing apace. In 2018, the current Liberal-National government in NSW announced it would boost the police force by recruiting 1,500 new officers, the largest influx in 30 years. The four-year project, costing more than half a billion dollars, is set to be completed next year.

The neighbouring state of Victoria has the largest police force of any jurisdiction in the country, with 22,000 officers, or 327 for every 100,000 people. The ratio is orders of magnitude greater than hospital beds, doctors or nurses per population. Demonstrating the bipartisan character of the police build-up, the Victorian Labor government announced in 2016 that it was hiring 3,100 additional police, the largest increase in state history, at a cost of \$2 billion.

The mentally-ill and vulnerable are only the first victims. The massive expansion of state forces is directed against the working class and its mounting social and political opposition.

The developing political radicalisation has found expression in the issue of police violence, with the killing of George Floyd by American cops in Minneapolis last year provoking some of the largest international demonstrations in history. The multi-racial protests included rallies of tens of thousands of people in Sydney, Melbourne and elsewhere in Australia.



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