

Slaughter on Seventh Avenue

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New York City cops chased down and executed Darrius Kennedy in Times Square last Saturday. The encounter began with an attempt to arrest the 51-year-old street performer on suspicion of smoking a marijuana cigarette, a misdemeanor. Kennedy fled arrest and waved a knife at the police, leading them on a slow-motion chase as he walked and skipped backward down Seventh Avenue.

It ended with Kennedy cornered at the entrance to an office building, seven blocks south of where the initial encounter began. By this time he was surrounded by scores of police, some armed with military-style assault weapons, and hemmed in by police vehicles. Two of the cops closest to him opened fire, shooting some 15 rounds and hitting him seven times. He was pronounced dead at Bellevue Hospital less than an hour later.

This was not Dodge City, but midtown Manhattan where Darrius Kennedy was gunned down like a dog. The incident was emblematic of the brutality that characterizes American society. The overwhelming force employed carried with it the stench of a police state.

Similar police killings take place every day and in every part of the country. Generally, they go unreported and unnoticed outside of the immediate area in which they take place. What distinguished the shooting last Saturday was that it unfolded in the middle of the afternoon in one of the most heavily traversed thoroughfares in the US, witnessed by hundreds of horrified tourists and passersby, some of whom fled in panic while others recorded the scene on their cell phones.

The official reaction was swift and unequivocal. Police Commissioner Ray Kelly declared that the police who killed Kennedy “acted appropriately.” New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg concurred, saying the cops “probably acted in responsible ways.” Bloomberg went on to declare that the victim “must have been

mentally deranged,” that his actions weren’t “something a sane person would do.”

The billionaire mayor is probably right about Kennedy’s state of mind. Witnesses reported hearing him screaming to the police, “Shoot me, shoot me!” But what are the implications of Bloomberg’s remarks? Is the penalty for exhibiting mental illness on the streets of New York death in a hail of gunfire?

The same weekend that Darrius Kennedy was riddled with bullets on Seventh Avenue saw bloodletting by police from coast to coast. In Appleton, Wisconsin on Friday night a policeman shot and killed Keith Gabriel, who had gotten in a dispute with a neighbor over shooting off fireworks. While Gabriel ignored police warnings to put down a gun, the local press reported that “some neighbors...questioned why the officer needed to fire four shots... at a physically and mentally disabled Vietnam veteran.”

In Bowling Green, Ohio on Sunday police gunned down Gregory Harrison after he called 911 saying that he was going to kill his brother. They found him standing drunk on railroad tracks, screaming for them to shoot him. The police said they fired at him with an AR-15 assault rifle after he walked toward them “hiding one of his hands.”

In Little Rock, Arkansas, 43-year-old Donald O’Fallon was shot to death when police responded to a report of a domestic dispute and he came out of his house holding a gun.

In Decatur, Georgia on Sunday morning police shot a man who had entered a Chevron gas station and chased customers with a knife. “Several orders or instructions were given to this man to drop the knife. He refused, and the officers at that point fired on the gentleman,” said Dekalb County Public Safety Director Wiz Miller.

In Brownsville, Texas, a grand jury reached a decision last week not to indict two police officers in the fatal shooting last February of 15-year-old Jaime Gonzalez, an eighth-grader gunned down in a school

hallway after he refused to put down a pistol that turned out to be a pellet gun.

While the FBI records in meticulous detail every category of crime committed in the US, no government agency keeps track of how many people die at the hands of the police. According to conservative estimates, however, at least 1,000 people each year are either shot dead or die in police custody after they have been arrested. The victims are drawn overwhelmingly from the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class.

Darrius Kennedy, whose last known address was a working-class neighborhood in Hempstead, New York, had been eking out a living as a street performer. He was known as the “Times Square ninja,” dressing up in a ninja costume, doing back flips and other stunts, and soliciting tips from tourists. The proliferation of such performers, including individuals dressed as Sesame Street’s Elmo, Mickey Mouse, Spiderman and other characters, is a measure of the protracted unemployment crisis and the increasing desperation of large sections of the population.

Just last week, it was announced that the city had been forced to open nine new homeless shelters after the homeless population had risen to 43,731, some 18 percent higher than a year ago. Two days later, the *New York Times* real estate section celebrated the fact that a 5,000-square-foot duplex apartment on Central Park, complete with its own ballroom, had gone on sale for \$95 million.

New York City’s 34,000-member police department has the essential task of policing the immense social chasm separating the world’s greatest global concentration of billionaires and multimillionaires—a top 1 percent that monopolizes nearly a third of the city’s personal income—from the millions of working people struggling to survive. This takes the form of the ubiquitous stopping and frisking of working class youth—nearly 700,000 such stops last year—and killings like that of Darrius Kennedy.

As with police departments across the country, the NYPD has grown increasingly militarized and developed an extensive intelligence apparatus, used to spy upon and entrap Muslims, protesters and others. Under the pretext of the global war on terror, there has been a vast investment of public funds in US policing, with the Department of Homeland Security pouring

some \$40 billion into state and local policing since 9/11. This is only a fraction of the \$635 billion spent on “homeland security” operations since then.

The essential response to protracted economic crisis and unprecedented social inequality has been a buildup of the infrastructure of a police state, whose real target is the American working class.

The result is daily horrors like the slaying of Darrius Kennedy and so many others for which no one is held accountable, combined with routine police brutality, ever more intrusive spying and mounting political repression. Such incidents shock the conscience, but are so frequent that they hardly come as a surprise. For broad sections of the population that are hostile to such methods, what is posed is the struggle for a more humane society, one that is dedicated to meeting the social needs of all of mankind rather than defending the wealth of a corporate and financial elite.

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