

Australia: Mentally-ill man in coma after brutal Victorian police assault

By Martin Scott
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A 32-year-old man with a history of mental illness is in an induced coma following his brutal arrest by Victorian police at Epping in Melbourne's north on Sunday.

Amateur footage of the incident revealed that Timothy Atkins was intentionally rammed by a police car, forcing him to fall flat on his back. Atkins was then chased on foot by police, pepper-sprayed, and repeatedly kicked after he collapsed to the ground.

Another video, taken moments later, shows the man face down, surrounded by at least five police officers, one of whom stomps Atkins' head to the ground when he attempts to stand. Police had been called to the scene after reports that Atkins, who was unarmed, had been behaving erratically.

Following public outrage when the videos were circulated, the senior constable who stomped on Atkins was suspended on full pay pending "investigation" by the Professional Standards Command, a division of the Victoria Police.

Any suggestion that the violent arrest of Atkins was an isolated incident, was dealt a blow by the news of a police shooting in Lilydale, east of Melbourne, on Tuesday morning.

While the 24-year-old victim was in this case armed with a knife, witness accounts suggest that he was not threatening and appeared confused before he was shot multiple times.

One witness told 3AW radio just before the shooting: "He's not waving the knife or anything, he's just wandering."

Another told the *Age* that after police followed the man across the carpark towards a service station: "He stopped for a second and looked around, he looked like he didn't know where he was ... he took a few steps and started to speed up and the senior policeman fired

first and two other [officers] shot as well."

Weeks earlier, a 32-year-old Aboriginal man, Corey Penney, was tackled and verbally abused by police while riding his bicycle to work, ostensibly because it did not have a headlight.

Speaking after the Lilydale shooting, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews insisted that there was not a systemic problem with the police. "Victoria Police are out there doing very important work," he declared. "I'm grateful to them, but where an individual incident occurs, which I don't think speaks to culture, it should be properly investigated and I have confidence that that's exactly what will happen."

Any such investigation will be a whitewash. Ruth Barson, legal director of the Human Rights Law Centre, wrote on Twitter following the Atkins arrest: "Professional Standards Command is code for police investigating police. This should be referred to IBAC, the independent police watchdog, for investigation. Time and again we have seen that when police investigate their own, impunity results."

The reality is that while dozens of such "independent" investigations by IBAC—the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission—or royal commissions, have been conducted, and occasionally resulted in prosecutions of police officers, nothing has fundamentally changed in the conduct of police.

This is because police violence is not the product of bad individuals, but of the role of the state as an instrument of class oppression. The victims are almost invariably working class, poor, Aboriginal or minority, or suffering from a mental illness.

Atkins, a roof plumber who is married with three children, had been at the Northern Hospital attempting to receive treatment for mental health issues, but had

left after waiting more than a day in the emergency department.

In the Northern region, only 26 percent of adults seeking mental health treatment at emergency departments are transferred to appropriate beds within eight hours. This is significantly lower than the statewide average of 54 percent, which itself falls far short of the officially-stated 80 percent target.

As reported on the *World Socialist Web Site* last week, the COVID-19 crisis and the associated social and economic crisis has seen significant increases in anxiety, depression and other mental health issues across the country and around the world.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the underlying crisis in Australia's health system, including in mental health. As is the case in capitalist economies the world over, successive Australian governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National, have slashed funding for essential public services including health and education, while vastly expanding military and police funding.

Per-capita spending on mental health services is lower in Victoria than in any other state or territory. While an estimated 3.1 percent of the population requires specialist mental health care, no state or territory achieves this. Only 1.8 percent of Australians are able to access this treatment, and just 1.1 percent of Victorians.

In the absence of adequate clinical care, Australians suffering from mental illness frequently fall victim to violent treatment at the hands of police. While recent protests over police violence have focused on the appalling record of official cruelty towards Aboriginal people, the reality is that all of Australia's most disadvantaged layers are subjected to the same brutality.

Under the guise of preventing the spread of COVID-19, police across the country have been granted unprecedented "emergency" powers to arrest and fine people for minor transgressions. Most notably, these have been used to shut down protests against police violence motivated by the global wave of unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd.

The limited coronavirus lockdowns that have been enacted in Australia have not had the character of a public health response, but of police measures. Rather than a major deployment of health workers for testing

and contract tracing, people, especially in working-class areas, have been accosted in their homes by police and military personnel.

At the same time, every effort has been taken to minimise disruption to the profit interests of big business. All responsibility for preventing the spread of COVID-19 has been placed on the shoulders of individuals, under conditions of a health crisis, mass unemployment and growing poverty. While governments are rushing to overturn all lockdown measures, in order to force workers back to their places of employment, regardless of the health dangers, repressive police powers are being retained and expanded.

This did not begin in March. The COVID-19 pandemic is merely being used as the latest pretext for the internal deployment of military forces and expanded policing provisions. Sweeping state of emergency powers were introduced during the bushfire crisis last summer, and a series of environmental demonstrations last year led the federal government, backed by the Labor opposition, to legislate five-year jail terms for advertising "unauthorised" protests on social media.

While Australia has not yet witnessed paramilitary deployments on the scale of what has taken place in Portland or elsewhere in the US, the underlying processes are the same.

The murder of Floyd, captured on video like the arrest of Atkins, ignited a powder keg of social tension among workers and young people confronting not only the threat of death or major illness by the global pandemic, but also the prospect of mass unemployment and years of austerity to pay back the trillions handed to big business by governments, as bailouts.

As the utter failure of the capitalist system has become apparent to millions of workers and young people, governments around the world are resorting to increasingly authoritarian measures to suppress the mounting unrest.

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