

# HUMAN

# RIGHTS

# ALERT

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A Psychiatric Survival Broadsheet



## TORONTO Former psych. 'patient' dies following encounter with the cops

The Toronto police have added yet another name to their long list of fatal encounters with psychiatrically labeled persons with the apparent beating death of a man outside a west-end variety store on the early morning of August 9.

55-year old Otto Vass was a former real estate broker and owner of a used appliance shop in the northern part of Toronto's Parkdale neighborhood. At about 1:30 AM on August 9, the manager of the Seven-Eleven store at College St. and Landsdowne Ave. notified police when Vass supposedly became involved in an altercation with several younger men.

By the time the police arrived these other alleged assailants had already fled. Vass was then escorted from the store by two cops.

### 'Grabbed for cop's gun'

What happened next is the subject of widely conflicting accounts. An unnamed police 'source' claims that Vass 'sucker-punched' one of the officers on the scene when asked to show his I.D. then attempted to grab one of the cops' guns after being wrestled to the sidewalk.

However, an account from a pair of civilian eyewitnesses painted quite a different picture of these events.

According to this version the police and Vass had been standing outside the store quietly talking when one of the two cops present abruptly pushed Vass to the ground 'without apparent provocation', then both proceeded to

strike him repeatedly with 'fists, feet and a baton.' They described the police as beating Vass 'worse than an animal' and said they heard him 'screaming in pain.' When two more cops arrived they allegedly held Vass down while their colleagues continued the assault.

Otto Vass quickly succumbed to his injuries and was pronounced dead at the scene. An autopsy subsequently revealed that Vass had suffered injuries to his head, extremities and upper body that were consistent with blows from a police baton.



*A Toronto cop demonstrates the force's often-used protocol for 'communicating' with marginalized persons*

The Special Investigations Unit has designated these four cops as 'subjects' (meaning their actions are under scrutiny) with eight others being designated as 'witness' officers.

As is typical in such situations

involving fatal civilian encounters with the police, the mainstream media has been quick to demonize this victim by publishing extensive details of his psychiatric history and supposed criminal record, claiming (among other things) that he'd once assaulted a nurse who was attempting to medicate him against his will and that he allegedly owed in excess of \$120,000 in unpaid child support to his first wife.\*

*(\*Editor's note: While I personally don't condone this kind of conduct (provided it's even true), in reference to how and why Mr. Vass died it is of absolutely no relevance. In this case he is clearly an innocent victim).*

### Given electroshock

The media accounts went on to describe Vass's extensive history of hospitalizations for 'bipolar disorder' (also known as 'manic depression') in Toronto, Mississauga and his native Hungary, where he'd apparently been given electroshock 'treatments.'

Again these mainstream accounts were countered repeatedly, by people who knew Otto Vass and described him as being a 'big-hearted and generous' man who was known to frequently allow parolees and persons out on bail to stay in his home for a nominal rent, and also offer them work repairing and selling the appliances in his shop.

The summertime campaigns of 'targeted policing' over the past two years have led to numerous other accounts of serious cop harassment and even outright violence against innocent civilians who have the mis-  
<Otto Vass - next page>

## **SURVIVORS' RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS!**

## <Otto Vass - continued>

fortune to be homeless, or who are part of a community of color, or who bear a psychiatric label. The media, politicians and the wealthy homeowners who are engaged in colonizing these previously lower-income neighborhoods all play a role in the systematic demonizing of these and other targeted groups, thus setting the stage for the kind of state violence that claimed the life of Otto Vass.

## CANADA

### August 10 is National Prison Justice Day

In 1974, a Millhaven Penitentiary inmate named Eddie Nalon slashed himself while confined to the prison's segregation unit. Millhaven's segregation cells are equipped with 'panic buttons' that a prisoner can press to alert staff of a possible medical emergency or other crisis, but the warning device in Nalon's cell had apparently been disabled by the guards. Consequently, no one responded to his call for help, and he succumbed to his wounds.

#### Peaceful remembrance

On the anniversary of his death (August 10, 1975) Eddie Nalon's fellow inmates at the 'Haven commemorated his tragic death by engaging in a peaceful one-day work stoppage and fast. In subsequent years similar remembrances for the women and men who have died while in prison have spread to institutions across this country, and even internationally.

Outside supporters have also held events of their own to draw attention to the situation of people who wind up incarcerated by the criminal 'justice' (or psychiatric) systems.

The exploding prison populations in most industrialized countries along with the increasing practice of warehousing psychiatrically labeled persons in jail for long periods on even minor charges has led to a situation where those on the inside are now facing unbelievably repressive conditions.

Psychiatric 'hospitals' are generally no better, being themselves a prison-like environment where the 'patients' often have no right to leave if they wish to do so, and are commonly denied even the basic right to refuse unwanted medical procedures. Frequently 'inmates' of this parallel system of incarceration spend months or even years there without ever being

charged with an offense or experiencing anything resembling due process.

The tremendously racist and hypocritical 'war on drugs' has been a top contributor to the burgeoning number of prisoners, especially in the United States. In an incredible display of double standards, the system imprisons one group of people for involvement with so-called 'illicit' drugs while legally mandating forced administration of other kinds of drugs (frequently more damaging than their 'illicit' cousins) to still another group of people - those who have been deemed 'mentally ill.'



### PERSONAL ANECDOTES Prison Justice Day Toronto, August 10, 2000

August 10 this year was the day when a court review of incredibly restrictive bail conditions placed on three organizers from the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty was scheduled.

The previous day there was a press conference at the courthouse, organized by a group of OCAP supporters. Just before it got underway police moved in and arrested a 27-year old York University student and union activist for his alleged role in the militant June 15 anti-poverty demonstration that has been widely (mis)labeled the 'Queen's Park Riot.'

As well as being the date for this particular court proceeding, August 10 was also the first anniversary of when OCAP's 'safe park' takeover of part of Allan Gardens was brutally closed down by the police in a classic manifestation of the 'social cleansing' mandate being carried out by municipal and provincial officials alike. **(The 'safe park' takedown resulted in 26 arrests. Most of the charges were subsequently dropped.)**

Supporters who packed the courtroom for the two-day hearing August 10/11 found themselves under intense police scrutiny, including being photographed and videoed by members of Toronto's 'intelligence' unit as the attempt to criminalize dissent continued unabated.

Upwards of a dozen additional arrests have occurred in the aftermath of the June 15 demonstration, with participants being subjected to strict - and quite likely unconstitutional - conditions for release that include non-association with OCAP or any of its members, severe geographical restrictions and bans from participating in demonstrations anywhere in Canada.

The submission by the Crown described these three defendants as being a 'cancer' that needed to be excised from OCAP, saying that 'when these three men get together, bad things happen - violent things happen.' (Funny thing that no mention was made of how the police behaved and continue to behave towards those who participated in June 15, and demonstrations in general).

The judge deferred his decision until September 14, meaning the situation essentially is still in limbo at this time.



'Safe Park' Allan Gardens August 7-10, 1999

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Contributions welcome!

(Contributions may be edited for space)

