

Police beating in Philadelphia captured on videotape

Tom Bishop
14 July 2000

In yet another case of police brutality that has drawn national headlines, more than a dozen Philadelphia cops were shown beating a wounded suspect on live TV on Wednesday, July 12. The scene was reminiscent of the brutality meted during the reign of Philadelphia Police Chief and Mayor Frank Rizzo in the 1970s, or more recently the beating of black motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles police.

The incident began when police attempted to arrest 30-year-old mechanic Thomas Jones of North Philadelphia who was driving a stolen car. Witnesses said after a chase Jones crashed the car and then put his hands up, but also ran. Bertha Jones, who was sitting on her porch with several other people, said she saw officers chasing the suspect across the street where he jumped an iron gate and put his hands in the air as if to surrender.

Jones said, "The cops ran over and started beating on him... beating on the man. He got one of their guns, and started shooting. He fired his shots off. They fired. There was a whole lot of shooting going on." Bullets from 45 shots reportedly ricocheted as children who had been playing on the sidewalks were rushed into their homes. Bullet holes were found in windows and doors of homes and in cars in the area. An officer was shot in the thumb. It is not clear whether the officer was shot by the suspect or by a stray bullet from another officer.

Jones, who was shot five times including in his stomach and arm during his arrest, somehow commandeered one of the police cruisers and fled the scene. He led dozens of police cars in a mile-long chase through North Philadelphia as a news helicopter recorded the scene live for local TV viewers. When he was finally stopped, the back window of the cruiser had been shot out and there were several bullet holes in the

car.

When police opened the driver's side door, an officer grabbed Jones by the shirt collar, pulled him out of the car, and shoved him to the ground. More than a dozen black and white officers surrounded Jones and began kicking and punching him. For a full 40 seconds they continued the beating as other officers ran from all directions, one cartwheeling over the hood of the stopped cruiser, to watch the beating or push other officers aside to get in their kick. One plainclothes officer could be seen leaning over the prone Jones and repeatedly punching him with his fist.

After the beating officers stood back as Jones was handcuffed and pulled to this feet. Blood could be seen on his shorts as he was pulled to a police van while being held in a headlock by the same plainclothes officer who had been punching him. Jones was hospitalized in critical condition after surgery. He also has contusions on his face. He has been charged with two counts of attempted murder.

At 11 p.m. Wednesday evening Democratic Mayor John Street, who had rushed back from the NAACP convention he was attending in Baltimore, held a press conference with Police Commissioner John Timoney in an attempt to defuse what was seen on the tape. Street said, "We want to assure all the citizens of this city that there will be a thorough and fair investigation of this incident. We also want to assure our police officers at the same time that there will be a proper and fair investigation of this incident. While the activity on the tape raises some serious questions for anyone who has seen it, the investigation of these cases is extraordinarily complex. I have complete confidence of Police Commissioner John Timoney, who will take charge of all aspects of these investigations."

Apparently, three investigations will be

undertaken—one by homicide detectives into Mr. Jones's activities and two by the internal affairs division into the actions of the police. Street also said District Attorney Lynn Abraham will participate in the investigation. Attorney General Janet Reno has ordered a federal investigation into the beating by the US Attorney's office in Philadelphia.

On Thursday, Police Commissioner Timoney angrily denounced any comparisons of the beating of Jones with the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991. In that incident, four officers were videotaped beating a prone King with batons. Timoney said this incident does not compare because Jones was resisting arrest and there were both black and white officers involved.

These video images raise questions about how often these incidents happen across the United States and then are given a “spin” by police to frame victims. On Thursday police were busy putting out reports speculating on Jones's possible involvement in other crimes. Already there are discrepancies in eyewitness accounts of the initial attempt to arrest Jones, which some witnesses reported began with a beating of Jones. Police are claiming Jones ran from his car after he crashed it, somehow got into a police cruiser and started shooting.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact