

Portland, Oregon: second police killing in 10 months

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James Jahar Perez was buried Saturday, April 2, six days after he was killed and only 10 months since the last police killing of another unarmed black resident in Portland. On March 28, police shot and killed 28-year-old Perez—who was driving alone on the city’s north side—during a traffic stop.

According to Assistant Chief James Ferraris, officers Sean Macomber and Jason Sery pulled Perez over for “failure to signal within 100 feet of making a turn.” After Perez stated that he did not have a driver’s license or identification, Macomber attempted to forcibly remove him from the vehicle. Sery, standing behind Macomber, then fired into Perez’s chest three times with a 9-mm gun. Sery claimed that he thought Perez had a gun.

A search of the victim and the vehicle failed to produce any weapon. According to the *Oregonian*, a “woman who identified herself as Maria said when Perez leaned over to unfasten his seatbelt, police shot him three or four times.”

Witnesses describe Sery as approaching the car with his gun drawn. The fact that Sery had his gun out contradicts the police department’s description of the event as a “routine traffic stop.” Many witnesses have stated to the media that Perez did not engage the officers beyond responding to their shouted demand to “Get out of the car” with the question, “What did I do?”

After Sery fired his gun, Macomber then fired his Taser gun at Perez. One of the darts hit Perez while the other embedded itself in the upholstery of the car seat.

In January, the city of Portland paid \$5,000 to settle a court claim that Sery and another officer had used excessive force. Martin Dennis sued the city in 2001 for being knocked unconscious and suffering injuries on his head, right ear and right eye while under arrest.

Last May, 21-year-old Kendra James was shot and killed while attempting to flee after a traffic stop. Expressing fear at being arrested, James had moved from the back of the vehicle into the driver’s seat and

attempted to drive away. Officer Scott McCollister, partially in the car as James pulled away, shot James once in the chest. McCollister claimed that he fired his weapon because he was afraid he would be killed if he fell under the moving vehicle.

After the shooting, the officers involved failed to provide immediate emergency medical attention. The explanation that they thought James was “faking”—and consequently failed to provide medical treatment—was essentially ignored by the investigators and the local media. McCollister—exonerated by a secret grand jury and returned to duty—was eventually suspended for fewer than six months by police Chief Mark Kroeker for using questionable tactics before the shooting. Kroeker himself was subsequently forced to resign over his handling of the Kendra James shooting.

Despite months of protests by Portland residents demanding an honest explanation for Kendra James’s killing, punishment of the individuals involved and a change in police department policies, no substantive reforms were implemented.

The killing of a second African-American within a space of 10 months has once again provoked widespread anger and criticism of the police and city government. This anger also stems from the ongoing abuse by police of the city’s black population. Reports have appeared daily in the local media of harassment and intimidation of African-American residents of Portland and its suburbs, including unjustified arrests, beatings and traffic profiling.

Since Perez’s shooting, the reaction of the media, politicians and community/religious leaders have followed a well-choreographed and predictable script: The condemnation of the shooting is quickly followed by calls on the government and police to ensure “transparency”; a rally is called and the demonstrators are urged to allow the process to take place.

On March 30, Multnomah County District Attorney

Mike Schrunk announced the formation of a public inquest into the shooting of Perez. The inquest is an informal gathering of facts. Although the six-person jury can rule a death an accident, a suicide or a homicide, it cannot determine guilt.

The toothlessness of this process was revealed in 1985, the last time an inquest was held. The jury at that time ruled the death of Lloyd Stevensen at the hands of Officer Gary Barbour as “criminally negligent homicide.” The grand jury declined to file charges against the officers involved. Since the grand jury holds secret hearings, it never explained the rationale behind this decision. Barbour returned to duty and continues to patrol the same area today.

Since the announcement, Officer Sery has filed a lawsuit in Multnomah County District Court to block the holding of the inquest. The complaint states that the “inquest would be prejudicial and deny the officer’s right to an impartial grand jury.”

Although racism—whether in the beliefs of an individual cop or in the institutional racism of the police department—played a despicable role in these killings, a more fundamental cause is to be found in the tensions generated in society by the huge polarization of social wealth over the last 20 years.

The unprecedented growth of poverty, homelessness and hunger has had a harsher impact on Oregon than on many other states. The growth of income inequality here is four times the national average: the richest fifth of the population has increased its income by 34 percent, while the poorest fifth suffered an income drop of 6 percent. Oregon is one of several states that lead the nation in the level of hunger.

Unemployment in Oregon has consistently exceeded the national average by about 2 percentage points, measuring 7.1 percent currently. The latest US figures show black unemployment at almost double the national average; extending this ratio to Oregon would place African-American unemployment at 14 percent.



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