

Mass arrests in Oakland protests against court verdict

Police officer who killed defenseless man given lenient verdict

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Police arrested 83 protesters in Oakland, California on Thursday, after hundreds went to the streets in demonstrations against a jury verdict of involuntary manslaughter for a police officer who was caught on video tape killing an unarmed man, execution-style.

Transit officer Johannes Mehserle was caught by at least four cameras shooting 22-year-old Oscar Grant III in the back as the victim lay face down on the ground and offered no resistance. Another officer was recorded screaming “bitch-ass nigger” at Grant shortly before he was executed.

Grant leaves behind a four-year-old daughter.

Mehserle now faces a maximum sentence of four years, although this could be extended should the judge in the case rule he used his gun illegally.

Mehserle could have been convicted of one of three possible crimes: second-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter or involuntary manslaughter. The prosecution sought to establish the intent to kill, hoping for a verdict of voluntary manslaughter or second-degree murder.

The defense claimed that Mehserle shot Grant accidentally, having pulled his gun instead of his Taser “stun gun.” The verdict of involuntary manslaughter accepts that the shooting was accidental.

The US Department of Justice will conduct an investigation, as will the US Attorney’s office in San Francisco and the FBI, to determine if the case warrants federal prosecution. Grant’s family is pursuing a separate civil suit against Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), who employed Mehserle.

“My son was murdered,” said Grant’s mother, Wanda Johnson. “He was murdered and the law has not held the officer accountable.”

“The system is rarely fair when a police officer shoots an African-American male,” said civil rights attorney John Burris, who is representing Grant’s family in the civil suit. “No true justice has been given.”

Video of the shooting, which occurred on New Years Day, 2009, spread rapidly on the Internet, giving rise to a large demonstration on January 7. That demonstration became a “riot” only after heavily-armed Oakland police, clad in riot gear, broke up the gathering, forcing protesters into side streets.

It is not unlikely that police also provoked Thursday’s arrests. Police turned out once again in riot gear, and police airplanes and helicopters “filled the sky,” according to one account.

A peaceful demonstration of over 1,000 gathered in the afternoon after the verdict was reported. But by the evening hundreds of police officers from across the Bay Area had “descended downtown to help local police quell the protesters,” according to the *Oakland Tribune*. Police deployed tear gas and arrests began after 8 p.m. and continued through the night.

Several stores were looted. Outside Foot Locker, eyewitnesses reported seeing people distributing shoes and clothes to the crowds. Graffiti written on walls in downtown Oakland included phrases such as “You can’t shoot us all!” and “Oscar Grant was here.”

There is deep anger in cities like Oakland over police brutality and miserable social conditions. Like many US cities, there is enormous poverty and inequality in Oakland. As of April 2010, 17.3 percent of the city was officially unemployed, but the real figure may be twice as high. Education and social services are being cut in response to large budget deficits at both the state and

the city level.

The only response to these conditions from the city government, long run by Democratic politicians—most of them African-American—is the use of police force against the population. These conditions inevitably give rise to police killing, brutalizing, and arresting innocent working class youth.

The killing of Oscar Grant was an extreme example of police violence. Last year the *World Socialist Web Site* described the murder, which is posted on YouTube :

“The footage is a chilling depiction of what appears to be a merciless police execution of an unarmed man: several uniformed officers are seen talking to Oscar Grant on the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) train platform at the Fruitvale station. Behind them, three young men are seated against a wall, handcuffed as suspects in a reported fight on the train. The video shows a standing Grant raise his hands, palms open, in a gesture of peace and cooperation, as if to calm the officers.

“Grant seems to offer himself for arrest and Officer Johannes Mehserle then roughly places him on the ground, face-first. Grant appears to react to the unnecessary roughness by looking back momentarily. Then—after a brief attempt to handcuff Grant—Officer Mehserle inexplicably pulls out his gun, points it at Grant—who is still laying face down—and pulls the trigger, killing him.

“Grant was unarmed. The Alameda County coroner’s office said Wednesday that the bullet penetrated his back, exiting his abdomen where it ricocheted off the concrete platform and re-entered his body at the torso, which ultimately killed him.” (See: “California: Police shooting of unarmed man provokes outrage, fuels protests”)



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