

Los Angeles Mayor defends shooting of immigrant worker

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Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has jumped to defend as “heroes” officers who shot an immigrant worker. Meanwhile, anger in the LA neighborhood of Westlake continues to grow, erupting at a mass meeting on Wednesday.

Manuel Jamines, a 37 year-old Guatemalan day laborer, was shot and killed on a crowded street Sunday, September 5. Many eyewitnesses say that he was unarmed, though police officers claim he possessed a knife at the time.

“We’ve got to go through an investigation,” Villaraigosa said, “but when it’s all said and done, I’ll guarantee you what’s going to come out is that these guys are heroes and I stand by them,” Villaraigosa said. “There was a man with a knife,” though this is disputed by residents. “That man with a knife was threatening individuals, innocent people who were on the street there.”

Villaraigosa’s adamant defense of the police reflects growing nervousness in the Los Angeles political elite over the potentially explosive character of the police shooting, which intersects with a growing economic crisis and decades of police brutality against the immigrant community of Westlake and other areas.

The mayor also defended Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck, who was shouted down by neighborhood residents at a community meeting of about 300 on Wednesday afternoon, half a block away from where Jamines was killed. While promising a transparent investigation, Beck defended the point of view that he has taken since last Sunday’s killing, that the officers involved had no choice but to use deadly force.

At the Wednesday meeting residents denounced the police. Several residents reported other incidents of police abuse that were never properly investigated. The crowd gasped in disbelief when informed by police

Chief Beck “please, listen, we do not teach police officers to take knives away from people.”

A report on Friday in the *Los Angeles Times* puts a further question mark over the credibility of the police report. Bicycle Officer Frank Hernandez, the officer who fired the shots that killed Jamines, had been previously accused of improperly using deadly force when he shot and wounded a 19-year-old man, Joseph Wolf, in December 2008.

After discovering that they had shot an innocent, unarmed youth, the officers involved concocted a story, that the youth had waved a gun and tried to flee from Officer Hernandez and his partner. Charges against Wolf were later dismissed, and he is currently suing the LAPD in federal court.

Wolff’s lawsuit alleges, “In order to cover up the unreasonable use of force that is a bad shooting, allegations were fabricated that Plaintiff was carrying a weapon and pointed it at Officer Hernandez.”

Angry residents protested every night throughout the week. Each night, a large crowd gathered at the corner of Union and 6th Streets, while others marched holding handmade signs denouncing the police. And each night, officers in riot gear closed off the street, while a few helicopters circled the area, shining spotlights on the crowd. At about 10 pm, police announced that an illegal assembly is taking place and swept the area. So far dozens have been arrested.

Alexander, a garment worker, who, like Jamines, came to Los Angeles from Guatemala seven years ago spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

“Those of us who come to the United States from Central America don’t travel all that distance and spend all that money just for economic reasons,” Alexander said. “We also come because we want to have rights. We want to have those freedoms that do

not necessarily exist in Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras.

“When something like this happens,” he said, referring to the shooting of Jamines, “you begin to see that corruption exists here in the United States. After shooting Jamines, the police make up a story. This kind of thing is not supposed to happen here. At first they said that they were afraid for their lives. Now, I understand that they claim that he was about to slice a pregnant woman, so they saved her life.

“Jamines was inebriated, I understand that. He was probably being rowdy and loud; I don’t drink, but I know people like him. That is why I don’t believe the knife story. It was probably a nail file or something like that. It would be more believable if Jamines had had a gun. Even in that case the police did not have to kill; they could have just shot him in the leg, or something.

Alexander spoke about the conditions of immigrant laborers. “A person gets here with all kinds of ideas,” he said, “and then finds out how tough things are, how poorly one must live. Jamines was a construction day laborer. He and many others assemble every day on the other side of this building [pointing in the direction of a Home Depot store.] Most of the time, they do not get any work. Sometimes they work all day and do not get paid what they were promised. That means that they have to be very careful with their money. For most of us there are people back home that depend on us.

“Myself, I work in the garment industry south of downtown. We do not even get minimum wage. I sew tee shirts at 12 cents per piece. Even working fast, the most I make is 300 pieces per day, less than \$40. We go in at 7am and leave at 6pm, six days a week. My rent is \$600 a month, shared with two other guys. Every month I send my sisters and cousins what I can. I have been doing that for four years. Before that, all the money I could spare went to pay the \$2,000 I had to pay to get to the US. It was actually more; because the first time I crossed the Bravo River I was turned back.

“In Central America our relatives need our remittances, and so does the government. All the thousands of dollars going back benefit their economies. They don’t want to change that. On the other hand, the garment factories benefit a lot from us being here also. They don’t want to change that. About us immigrants, all you could say is that the money goes through our hands, but never stays.”



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