

Five New Orleans police officers stand trial for post-Katrina killings

Naomi Spencer
12 July 2011

A federal trial has begun against five current and former New Orleans police officers charged in the killing and maiming of unarmed residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Opening statements were made June 27.

The victims were gunned down as they crossed the Danziger Bridge on September 4, 2005, six days after Katrina devastated the city.

Seventeen-year-old James Brissette and 40-year-old Ronald Madison were killed, and four others were severely wounded in the shooting. Police are also charged with devising a cover-up that was maintained for years.

The shooting was one of numerous instances of police brutality in the week after the disaster. While thousands of mostly poor black residents languished in flooded neighborhoods for days without food, water, or humanitarian aid, law enforcement roamed the streets armed with assault weapons.

In the name of preventing looting, New Orleans police and other security forces were given a free hand to shoot to kill by government officials from then-President Bush on down. Nearly 65,000 military personnel were deployed in the city, mainly to protect private property and suppress civil unrest. Residents seeking to escape the floodwaters or locate missing loved ones were vilified by the political and media establishment as “looters” and “thugs.”

Facing 25 charges of civil rights violations are Sergeants Robert Gisevius and Kenneth Bowen, officer Anthony Villavaso, and former officer Robert Faulcon. Along with these four, retired Sergeant Arthur Kaufman is charged with obstruction of justice. Five former officers have already pleaded guilty to participating in a cover-up involving false witnesses, falsified reports, and plotting to plant a gun.

The case has gone through several iterations. In late 2006, seven officers were indicted by the Orleans Parish District Attorney’s office, but in 2008 the case was

thrown out on the grounds of prosecutorial misconduct. That same year federal prosecutors took it up. In February 2010, Police Lieutenant Michael Lohman pleaded guilty to conspiracy to cover up the killings. Lohman is a key witness in the government’s case.

On the morning of the incident, two groups of family members were making their way over the Industrial Canal from the flooded New Orleans East neighborhood to the higher Gentilly neighborhood. The high-rise Interstate 10 bridge was one of the few ways of moving across the city in the days after the storm.

Testifying as a government witness June 29, officer Jennifer Dupree said that on the morning of the shooting, she and other officers were driving east on the bridge when they were flagged down by a man wearing a St. Landry Parish Sheriff’s Office shirt. “Get down! They’re shooting at us!” Dupree said he yelled at them. She told the court she heard several shots and saw armed men in the street. Dupree called for reinforcements.

The circumstances in the Danziger Bridge shooting are convoluted, primarily because the police officers involved were responsible for the subsequent investigation and collecting of evidence. Testimony of the victims paints a scene of carnage.

Ronald and Lance Madison, 49, were on their way to their brother’s dentist office, where they had taken shelter. Like many others, the pair had spent several days stranded on the roof of a submerged apartment building awaiting rescue. As they reached the west side of the bridge, out-of-uniform police barreled up in a commandeered rental truck and immediately opened fire.

Ronald Madison, who was mentally disabled, was shot seven times in the back as he tried to flee. After he fell on the bridge, an officer repeatedly stomped on the dying man. His brother Lance, who was wounded, moved his brother’s body to a motel parking lot. There, he was arrested, accused of shooting at police.

Another family was attacked at the east end of the bridge. Leonard and Susan Bartholomew, their teenaged son, daughter, and nephew Jose Holmes were out in search of food. Traveling with them was James Brissette, a high school senior from the Ninth Ward who was trying to find his mother.

In testimony given June 29, Jose Holmes said officers did not identify themselves as police or warn the families. When they opened fire, the family fell to the ground and tried to hide behind concrete barriers. Holmes had already been shot in the arm, elbow, abdomen, and jaw when he sought cover. He told the court that he was lying on his side behind a slab when one of the cops leaned over it, and fired twice more directly into his stomach.

At the hospital, Holmes said, a nurse “kept insinuating that I was shooting at helicopters.” He was unable to speak, but said he shook his head, and assumed that the police had told hospital staff they had come under attack.

Susan Bartholomew was also badly wounded in the attack. In testimony, June 27, she said after the shooting stopped, the police ordered her to raise her hands. “I couldn’t do it, because my arm was shot off,” she said. “I raised the only hand I had.” She and her family members were ordered not to look at their assailants. Bartholomew told the court that she did anyway, and saw “NOPD” on their shirts.

Along with other victims, Bartholomew was taken by ambulance to West Jefferson Memorial Center, where she remained for several months. She said that police officers interviewed her and her husband on four occasions. She said she felt intimidated by the officers, who repeatedly asked if they knew who had shot them. She said she and Leonard Bartholomew decided to lie to them, saying they thought maybe they had been shot by National Guard.

Immediately after the incident, several of the victims were charged with attempted murder of police officers, including Susan Bartholomew’s 14-year-old son.

Lance Madison was charged with eight counts and spent 25 days in jail before his family was able to obtain a lawyer and post bond. A false police report, filed the same day as the attack, claimed that Madison threw a gun into the Industrial Canal as he fled from officers.

In testimony given July 8, a witness testified that he had seen the attack and that neither Madison brother had anything in their hands. The witness, Robert Rickman, was working at the motel where Ronald Madison lay dead. He took photos of the body, but was swiftly ordered by police to go inside. There, the police smashed his camera. Rickman obtained another camera and took more

pictures a few hours later.

Another witness at the motel, Douglas Bloedorn, testified he tried to warn Lance Madison to take cover, as an officer pursued him with a rifle. “Get in your room and get down!” he was ordered. Within minutes, he said, his motel room was filled with police, who stayed for 45 minutes.

After this rampage, police convened for a discussion at a substation. “There were just three questions,” Officer Michael Hunter testified July 6. “What weapon did you fire, how many times did you fire and who did you fire at.” He said no one asked whether the victims had fired on police, because everyone knew they were unarmed.

“It was pretty obvious that they were initiating a cover-up. They didn’t separate us and ask us questions individually. Nothing was collected from the scene,” he said. “At some point Lieutenant Lohman turned to somebody to his right and said, ‘We can’t have this looking like a massacre.’”

In his own testimony, Lohman explained that he put Sgt. Kaufman in charge of compiling a report. “I told them to collect their thoughts and figure out what happened and come back with a plausible story.” The report summarily cleared all of the involved officers of wrong-doing and characterized the shootings as self-defense.

Hunter also testified that Sgt. Robert Gisevius had said he had been involved in another shooting in the aftermath of Katrina in which he “had to empty his magazine” of his gun, killing a man.

The case epitomizes the brutality and lawlessness with which the New Orleans police force operated, both before and in the aftermath of Katrina. It is among nine federal civil rights and murder investigations into post-Katrina police violence, including one involving the unprovoked killing of an unarmed man and burning of his body. Nearly two dozen current or former police officers have been charged.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact