

Thousands protest police shooting of 13-year-old boy in California?

David Levine
30 October 2013

Thousands of people attended a noon rally in Santa Rosa, California to protest the killing of 13-year-old Andy Lopez, who was shot dead by a sheriff's deputy on October 22. Lopez was carrying a toy pellet gun that the deputy and his partner claim to have mistaken for an AK-47 assault rifle.

Hundreds of protesters marched through downtown Santa Rosa on October 23, 24, and 25 demanding "justice for Andy." Mourners and protesters have also held vigils each day since the killing. Over one thousand people attended Lopez's memorial service on October 27.

In addition to expressing outrage over the killing, protesters claimed that law enforcement in Santa Rosa has routinely dealt with working-class, poor, and Hispanic families with excessive harshness, and that the shooting of Andy Lopez was part of a larger trend of police brutality. Santa Rosa police had also shot and killed 16-year-old Rogelio Bautista in 2005 and 18-year-old Alejandro Ortega in 2009.

Initial news reports carried contradictory explanations of the events as to whether the deputies repeatedly ordered Lopez to drop the supposed gun and he refused, or whether they approached him from behind and shot him before he had a chance to turn around.

A statement by the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department later admitted that when the deputies shot the boy, no more than ten seconds had elapsed since they had spotted him with the toy gun. They handcuffed him as he lay dying, and it took sixteen seconds more for them to call for medical assistance. Paramedics declared the boy dead on the scene. An autopsy later revealed that seven bullets had struck Lopez, two of which caused fatal injuries.

The incident was, in fact, the third fatal shooting

by police in less than 24 hours in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Later that week California police shot and killed suspects in at least two other unrelated incidents.

In 2000, following a string of eight fatal shootings by police over a period of less than three years, the California Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission recommended that Sonoma County create civilian review boards to investigate incidents of police violence. The Sonoma County chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union has also promoted the creation of independent civilian review boards. The county has never taken any action on these recommendations.

Under the procedures currently in effect in Sonoma County, each such incident is first investigated by a department that was not involved in the incident itself (in this case, the Santa Rosa Police Department), then by the district attorney, and finally by a grand jury empaneled once per year. The 2000 report argued that these procedures are insufficient because the grand jury lacks budgetary, organizational, and physical independence from law enforcement.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has also launched its own investigation of the October 22 shooting.

On Monday, October 28, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department confirmed that all of the shots had been fired by deputy Erick Gelhaus. Gelhaus and his partner at the time of the shooting have been on paid administrative leave since then.

The police shooting of a thirteen year old boy holding a toy gun on a peaceful city street points to the brutalization of American society under the impact the assault waged by the financial aristocracy on living

conditions of working class communities and Washington's endless imperialist wars. Class tensions are sharpening and police are becoming increasingly militarized.

The police shooter, Gelhaus, is an embodiment of this trend. In addition to 23 years of experience in the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, Gelhaus is a senior firearms instructor for 10-8 Consulting and a writer for the Modern Service Weapons website, as well as S.W.A.T. Magazine, a publication for police and military gun users. He also served as an infantry squad leader for the US Army in Iraq.

In an article in S.W.A.T. Magazine in October 2003, Gelhaus described street gangs as “domestic terrorists,” explicitly comparing them to al Qaeda. He wrote that “thousand of other terrorists continue to walk our streets” and described how to recognize such terrorists by “identification, association, non-verbal identification and attire, and areas where they may be prevalent.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact