

Albuquerque, New Mexico civilian board members resign, citing fraud of police oversight

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Three civilian members of the Police Oversight Commission (POC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico have resigned, saying they can no longer “continue to pretend” they have power over the police after a series of killings.

Three of the six members of the oversight commission, Richard Shine, Jonathan Siegel and Jennifer Barela, sent their resignation letters to Mayor Richard Berry and city councilors this past week. In their letters they said that commission members lacked any real powers to hold the Albuquerque Police Department (APD) to account, and that their efforts were consistently “stymied” by the city attorney’s office.

Moreover, the POC has no authority to discipline police officers, they wrote. The APD chief has the final word on oversight and does not have to explain his reasoning to the commission or the public.

The “oversight” process of the APD was criticized by a US Justice Department report released last week, which found a “pattern of unreasonable force” by the police. The deadly use of force against unarmed civilians was found to be “excessive” and “unconstitutional.”

Since 2010, 23 people have been killed by police in Albuquerque, which has a population of around half a million. On March 16, APD officers shot and killed James Boyd, a mentally ill homeless man for the “crime” of illegally camping. His death was captured on video and sparked protests in downtown Albuquerque that were violently dispersed by tear gas and riot police.

In his resignation letter, Siegel wrote, “I cannot continue to pretend or deceive the members of our

community into believing that our city has any real civilian oversight.” Another commissioner who resigned, Shine, wrote how at the most recent POC meeting, the City Attorney’s Office told the members they could no longer rule against the police chief’s finding in civilian complaints; all they could was “rubber stamp” those findings.

While the POC is supposed to have nine members, three seats were already vacant before this week’s resignations. However, the POC’s rules say the remaining commissioners can keep meeting since a majority of the members who have been approved and continue serving can form a quorum, that is only two of the three remaining members.

The resignations have forced the City Council to rename the POC the Civilian Police Oversight Agency and debate legislation that would increase funding and give the commission additional powers. Regardless of the name change, the new committee will seek to whitewash the crimes of the APD and give the illusion of transparency and accountability.

Nevertheless, the three resignations are a damning indictment of the APD and their claims to have “independent” and “civilian” oversight. According to Shine’s resignation letter, the POC attempted to monitor all APD Internal Affairs investigations, including the use of Tasers and officer-involved shootings, only to be blocked by the City Attorney’s office. The latter told the chief of police he did not have to comply with the commission’s request or discuss the matter further because it was “an election year,” according to Shine.

In addition, at the most recent POC meeting, the City Attorney’s office argued that the commission’s

independent investigation of a citizen's complaint merely meant, "a non-substantive, ministerial function akin to merely 'rubber stamping' the Chief's findings." Shine denounced these measures as making a "complete mockery" of civilian oversight of the APD. He concluded, "I refuse to contribute to the deception of the public by continuing to serve on the POC."

The resignations are further proof that the APD considers itself above the law. The lack of any accountability and the emphasis on overwhelming deadly force demonstrate the increasing militarization and authoritarianism of the police. Behind all this lies the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor and the ruling classes' fear of a social explosion. New Mexico in particular is one of the most impoverished states in the union.

While the Justice Department and the Obama administration have intervened with their own criticisms of the local police in order to dampen public anger, the state violence in New Mexico is part of a broader phenomenon, including the militarization of police forces throughout the country and the unconstitutional activity of the federal government and its intelligence agencies. The bodies of armed men in the military and police forces act with increasing disregard for the most basic standards of civilian government and democratic rights.



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