

Public meetings in Albuquerque attempt to defuse anger over police brutality

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Following its report last month on the epidemic of police brutality in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) held a series of three two-hour public meetings the evenings of April 28 to 30. The meetings were attended by a wide range of residents: young people, victims' family members, and senior citizens, together with various local activists and politicians.

The restricted character of the DOJ meetings showed that they were aimed not at addressing the sources of police brutality, but at restoring public confidence in a police department that has been totally discredited.

The DOJ report, summarized in an April 10 letter to the mayor, Richard Berry, had found that the Albuquerque Police Department (APD) had engaged “in a pattern or practice of use of excessive force, including deadly force, in violation of the Fourth Amendment.” The Fourth Amendment, part of the Bill of Rights, prohibits “unreasonable searches and seizures,” including excessive or unreasonable force by the police. The report cited a large number of incidents where lethal and “nonlethal” violence was unleashed on people who posed no threats to the officers.

The report was released between the March 16 shooting of mentally ill homeless camper James Boyd and the April 21 killing of 19-year-old Mary Hawkes. Hawkes's death brought to 24 the number of fatalities out of 39 officer-involved shootings since 2010.

In the wake of the report, three members of the city's Police Oversight Committee resigned, complaining that they had been part of a rubber-stamp institution with no real oversight power.

In response to many questions that have arisen following these latest cases of police murder, APD police chief Gorden Eden Jr. has stonewalled and pled ignorance. His predecessor, Ray Schultz, who resigned last year amid criticisms of his eight-year watch, is

currently under a cloud of suspicion for his cozy relationship with the Taser Corporation.

The Taser Corporation is infamous for its eponymous electroshock device, which has become nearly ubiquitous in American police departments as well as internationally. Backed up by junk science, the company claims that the device is “non-lethal”—even though Amnesty International has documented at least 500 deaths associated with it as of February 2012. The Taser Corporation is also responsible for lapel cameras that are issued to APD officers, which often “malfunction” (or are deliberately shut off) during beatings and shootings.

Popular anger continues to mount over police brutality in the United States. On average, between one and two people are killed by the police every day. It goes without saying that the Department of Justice, under the direction of the Obama administration, has no intention of reversing these trends in Albuquerque or anywhere else.

At the first DOJ meeting, held in a community center in the city's southwest quadrant, the framework was established that was followed throughout the other two meetings.

Attendees who wished to talk had to line up and take a number. At the start of each meeting, a US Attorney declared that “we're now entering a new phase” and “we're going forward and again we're asking for your input. .. for suggestions, your ideas... that are workable.” He emphasized that “we are not talking about specific officers, we are not talking about specific incidences, we are not talking about criminal matters.” In this, the DOJ echoed the Obama administration's mantra of “looking forward, not backward.”

The US Attorney stated that after getting input from all parties, the DOJ would produce a draft agreement that it would take to the city. “We are optimistic that the city will agree to that agreement,” which will then be taken to the court, to become a “court-enforceable document.” He

added, “We have eight specific areas that we’re asking you to comment on.”

The organizers announced that they would form five-person “focus groups” that would meet in smaller rooms. However, before the organizers could implement this procedure, they were quickly pelted with questions and expressions of outrage from attendees.

One crowd member shouted, “Why isn’t there going to be some kind of prosecution, an indictment in this case of these people? I mean, you said right there they committed murder. They committed evident assaults of people. It’s against the laws of the Constitution.” Others called for punishment of the officers and the firing of the mayor, the police chief, and other city officials.

Of particular concern to a number of attendees was police chief Eden Gorden’s inability—or refusal—to provide lapel camera footage of the most recent police killing of Mary Hawkes, when five officers were at the scene. The DOJ report had noted that officers often initiated encounters with their lapel cams turned off. In fact, last year at least 80 APD officers were “disciplined”—receiving toothless written reprimands—for not having their lapel cams activated.

This reporter attended the second meeting on April 29. Again, people who wanted to give their input had to sign in at a table and be assigned a number. In the main meeting hall, some people carried signs denouncing police violence and making demands. Against one wall, there was a line of enlarged photos of some of the victims, among them James Boyd and Kenneth Ellis, an Iraq War veteran with PTSD.

The US Attorney again insisted on the procedure of “focus groups,” but after the focus groups had been convened the main hall was given over to an open microphone. It was then that participants vented their anger and frustration with the brutality and official indifference.

An older woman whose home was raided by APD officers as she was preparing dinner—the officers had the wrong address—described being “scared to death ... that’s why I’m here.”

A mother of three spoke whose husband was killed by a police officer who was known to be suffering from PTSD, but who was still retained on the force. Another woman criticized the local media for their frequent acceptance of the APD’s official (and often fictitious) versions of events. A retired city auditor spoke who had reported instances of fraud and corruption in the APD—and who had been subjected to police retaliation for her efforts.

Other speakers decried the lack of training for police, shortages of mental health facilities, and cuts in funding to social services. Throughout, the DOJ organizers sought to channel all the demands into the framework of the “consent decree.”

If history is any guide, a “consent decree” will do little to reverse the trends in the APD, which differs from the rest of the country’s police departments more in degree than in kind. A case in point is the Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart/CRASH scandal of the late 1990s, which exposed the LAPD as functioning essentially as a criminal enterprise: lying, perjury, filing false police reports, planting evidence, frame-ups, drug dealing, savage beatings, unprovoked shootings against unarmed victims—with weapons often planted after the fact—and threats against witnesses and defendants to force them to change their testimony or pleas. Today, notwithstanding the “consent decree” that was imposed by the Department of Justice, the LAPD retains its reputation for criminality and brutality.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, democratic and legal rights are increasingly incompatible with the program of social counterrevolution and imperialist war being carried out by the ruling class. The conclusion of a *World Socialist Web Site* editorial on the Amadou Diallo case in New York (February 28, 2000) still holds true today:

“The ruling establishment has no choice but to employ state repression to defend its system and its privileges ... Appeals for police reform or Federal court intervention will not change this underlying source of police brutality. That requires the building of a new, independent political movement fighting to unite all working people—black, white, Hispanic and immigrant—in a common struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalist oppression and social misery.”



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