

Norfolk police chief apologizes for K9 attack as brutality cases mount

Ed Hightower
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On January 30, Norfolk, Virginia Police Chief Michael Goldsmith attempted to head off a public relations disaster when he publicly apologized for the January 25 arrest of Norfolk State University student London Colvin, 21, for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. A police canine bit Colvin when she was lying on the ground with several officers pinning her down, witnesses say.

Goldsmith told a press conference, “It’s my fault ... We had other levels of force we could have gone to to accomplish the arrest of Ms. Colvin. The use of the K-9 was not necessary in this case. It was unreasonable use of it.”

Goldsmith also promised to have Colvin’s medical bills paid for and said, “I will make this right.”

Police were responding to a fight at a party. Witnesses say that Colvin, an Army reservist with no criminal record, was trying to walk away from the area and did not want to talk to police about what she saw at the party. When she refused to speak with officers, they tackled her and set the dog on her. Colvin required 41 stitches. Her father describes the dog bite wound to the back of her leg as showing “a gaping hole.” Colvin will have to have plastic surgery.

Last week, Norfolk City Attorney Richard Pishko agreed to drop the disorderly conduct and resisting arrest charges against Colvin.

Goldsmith’s admissions are highly unusual. In a previous period, such conciliatory remarks toward a victim of police violence by a department head would have provoked outrage among rank-and-file officers, and may well have led to a dismissal. In this case, however, local politicians have stepped in to prevent this incident from sparking unrest.

Democratic mayor Paul Fraim told the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper that police officers had to “own up to

it” when they made mistakes. “That’s what we are doing here. I think we have all learned that you have got to be constantly vigilant to make sure that we are in good communication with the community and that you maintain good relationships.”

The above quotations come from a fawning editorial from the *Virginian-Pilot*, titled “Modeling leadership in Norfolk Police Dept.,” which provides a keen insight into the thinking of the local elite.

“Goldsmith’s statement calmed a city sensitive to police actions, particularly after three men were killed by Norfolk officers last year, and in light of the national unrest following episodes of police violence around the country. He showed courage in taking responsibility, and doing so without the equivocation that ordinarily marks the reaction of police officials.”

Not content simply to praise Goldsmith’s courage, the editorial has some advice for pro-police hard liners: “Police officers complaining about Goldsmith’s comments would do well to remember that his job isn’t about protecting their reputations; it’s about making Norfolk safer for all citizens.”

Local NAACP President Joe Dillard, Norfolk Vice-Mayor Angelia Williams, state Delegate Daun Hester and other “community leaders” appeared at a town hall meeting January 31 alongside Chief Goldsmith and other police officers to discuss relations between the department and the community. The event was an effort to smooth over resentment against the police department, focused on mutual respect, hiring more minority police officers, and other banalities that will do nothing to remedy the underlying class tensions.

Dillard also told a press conference February 2 that his organization had held a series of meetings with the City Attorney, with the apparent aim of keeping the situation under control. Dillard touted his

organization's supposed tough talk to the City Attorney at the press conference, saying, "we were very adamant and vocal about what we wanted when we sat down with the City Attorney. We are pleased because you had two strong institutions going head to head. There was some very intense discussion on this very important issue."

Popular anger against the Norfolk Police Department is entirely justified and flows from the department's abysmal track record in recent years.

Last August, Norfolk police shot and wounded sailor Jasmine Glespie, who allegedly refused an officer's order after a traffic stop. Glespie is suing the City and the officer, alleging excessive force and negligence, for \$5.3 million.

On June 6 of last year, Norfolk police shot and killed 35-year-old David Latham, claiming that the mentally ill man was threatening them with a knife. Witnesses said that three officers charged Latham telling him to drop the knife, and started shooting at him seconds later. Latham did not charge the officers or threaten anyone, or otherwise provoke the shots fired at him.

Just two days prior, on June 4, a Norfolk police officer shot and killed another mentally ill man, 72 year old Lawrence Faine, at his apartment in an assisted living facility. The officer was serving a court order to have Faine taken into custody because he was deemed unable to take care of himself. In this instance, too, the officer claimed he was threatened with a knife. There were no injuries to the officer.

A 2010 incident involving the death of Norfolk police trainee John Kohn shows the brutality with which the department trained new recruits. As captured on video, Kohn died from repeated strikes to the face by a fellow officer who was pinning him down.

In a 2008 incident, a Norfolk officer used excessive force against a mentally ill woman, Pamela Brown. Brown is known in the area as the "hula hoop lady" because she compulsively, and quite harmlessly, hula hoops in the grassy median on a busy Norfolk street. The officer was responding to a noise complaint. He Tasered Brown, claiming that he thought she was reaching toward her waistline for a weapon. Ultimately, the city dropped all charges against Brown.

As is clear from the response from all sections of the local political establishment, there is a concerted effort to prevent social tensions and animosity toward police

from reaching a boiling point.

As happened in numerous American cities in late 2014, Norfolk saw large, militant protests against police violence, which featured the slogans, "hands up, don't shoot" and "I can't breathe," referring to infamous police killings in Ferguson, Missouri and in New York City.

Norfolk workers and youth who oppose police violence must be warned: the NAACP and Democratic party operatives aim above all to contain and dissipate justified outrage. Real opposition to police violence has to understand its source: the deepening social chasm between a tiny financial elite on the one hand and the vast working class majority on the other. A new movement must be built against police repression and against the capitalist system on which it is based.

We encourage those interested in taking up the struggle for socialism to contact the WSWS about building neighborhood action committees in working class areas and in building IYSSE chapters at area colleges and universities.



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