

Michigan policeman who severely beat motorist Floyd Dent on trial for assault

Lawrence Porter
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The criminal trial of Inkster, Michigan police officer William Melendez for the severe beating of longtime autoworker Floyd Dent just finished its second week. The trial is being held at the Wayne County Circuit Court in Detroit before Judge Vonda Evans.

With over 1,000 police shootings so far this year, it is a rare case when a policeman is charged for a violent crime. In fact, Melendez's actions only came to light after the release through Freedom of Information requests of police videos that had been hidden by the police with the help of local officials.

Although several police departments were involved in the arrest of Dent—including Dearborn Heights police and Michigan State troopers—only Melendez has been charged with a crime.

Melendez, who had earned the nickname “Robo Cop” for his violent history, is being charged with misconduct in office, assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder, and assault by strangulation. He faces up to 10 years in jail if convicted.

The trial has reviewed events beginning on the evening of January 28 when Dent, now 58 years old, was pulled over for a routine traffic violation. Dent, who is African American and has worked for 38 years at Ford, was then violently arrested and charged with resisting arrest, assault on a police officer and possession of cocaine.

It was not until March, when the first of a series of videos came to the possession of a local news station, that the extent of the crimes that were carried out against Dent were revealed.

The video of the violent arrest, which was played in court, shows Melendez approaching the car with his gun pulled. His partner, John Zeilkeniewski, savagely pulls Dent out of the car while his hands are up to show he did not possess a firearm. Melendez grabs Dent by the neck and beats him as hard as he can in the head.

Dent recounted the details of the assault at the trial. He

said he did not bite Melendez, as Melendez has claimed, and that he was not trying to resist the police but had pulled his hand up to his face in an attempt to protect himself.

“I didn't resist in any way,” said Dent at the trial. “They said, ‘Get out of the car or I will blow your MF head off.’” Dent said that when Melendez was hitting him it felt as if he had an object in his hand, and he blacked out.

“I tried to protect the right side of my face,” said Dent. “That's when Melendez started beating me in the head. I told him to stop, I can't breathe. He tried to kill me. He choked me so hard I couldn't catch my breath.”

Dent added, “He snatched me out of the car and threw me to the ground. He jumped on me and grabbed me by the throat. Then he started choking me and started beating me in the head.”

When asked why he did not stop his car right away, Dent said he was trying to make it to an area with better lighting. “Half the area is real dark, and the only lit area is by the old precinct,” referring to the closed Inkster police station.

Dent testified that the 16 blows to the head left him bleeding “real bad,” and he asked to be taken to be given medical treatment. Instead he was transported to the police station where he was further humiliated. The altercation left him with a fractured left orbital around his eye, bleeding in his brain, four broken ribs and taser burns from being tasered three times on his stomach and thigh.

During his testimony Dent spoke with slow, stammered speech, a condition caused by head wounds he suffered in the attack.

Dent admitted that at the time he was arrested he was driving with a suspended license, but he did not have a criminal history.

After the beating, Melendez can be seen with the group of officers pulling out a baggie from his pocket, a baggie

that was similar to the evidence used to charge Dent with the illegal possession of drugs.

The publication of the dashcam video fueled widespread anger that had already erupted over earlier police murders nationally. The impact on Dent's case was immediate. After viewing the video, prosecutors were forced to drop all charges against Dent with the exception of drug charges.

Melendez was at that point only reassigned to a different job in the police department. However, in April another video came to light, also concealed by the Inkster Police Department, that showed the reaction of police after Dent was arrested. All of the officers, including Melendez, were congratulating each other for the assault. One cop mockingly reenacted the attack while the others sprayed a chemical cleaner on their uniforms to clean off Dent's blood. All of this took place while Dent was sitting in the police station in severe pain, asking for medical attention.

After the second video surfaced, all charges against Dent were dropped. Melendez was fired from both the Inkster and Highland Park police departments, and the Wayne County Prosecutor announced that he would be charged with a felony. Later, two other officers involved in kicking and tasing Dent were suspended for 15 and 30 days, respectively.

In May, Dent settled his civil lawsuit with the city of Inkster for \$1.4 million.

Confronted with overwhelming evidence of criminality by the police, prosecutors decided to prosecute only Melendez.

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The blatant racism of Melendez's partner, Zeilkeniewski, who is a volunteer cop, was revealed during the trial when it was confirmed that he received and used racial slurs in text messages after the encounter and dozens of times later.

A text he received in March said, "At least give me the satisfaction of knowing you're out there beating up n***ers right now." Zeilkeniewski replied, "lol, just got done with one." The prosecutor's office obtained the messages in a subpoena of his cell phone messages.

At the court hearing on Tuesday, Jennifer Wilson, forensic lab director for the Michigan State Police, testified that blood taken six hours after Dent's arrest showed no evidence of drugs or alcohol. This refuted claims by Melendez that Dent was high on drugs when he was arrested.

The other two witnesses were Twana Powell, the chief investigator for the Michigan State Police, and former Inkster Police Chief Vicky Yost who was in charge of the Inkster Police at the time of the assault.

Yost refused to discipline any of the police involved in the beating and resigned after she was overruled by local government officials. Under questioning by Melendez's lawyer, she defended the decision to pull Dent over but later admitted that it was difficult viewing the video and there was no justification for the beating.

The doctor who treated Dent at Garden City Hospital also testified last week. Farhan Azeez said Dent's injuries were so severe that he had to be admitted to the intensive care unit. Azeez said Dent had fractures to the face, but he did not consider them to be life-threatening.

Melendez has a long history of filing false reports, planting evidence, using excessive force and making unlawful arrests. Twelve lawsuits have been filed against him, resulting in millions of dollars in settlements.

In 2003, the US attorney's office filed indictments against 17 Detroit cops who they said were waging a private war on citizens they considered to be undesirable. The group was led by Melendez. The police were charged with stealing guns, money and drugs from suspects, and according to a *Los Angeles Times* report, "planting weapons and breaking into homes without search warrants."

Melendez was considered to be one of the worst cops on the Detroit Police force, costing the city more than \$1 million before he left in 2007.

The defense rested its case on Thursday, bringing the trial portion to an end. Closing arguments are expected next week and from there it goes to the jury. Significantly, Melendez did not take the stand to defend his actions.



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