

New York City Rikers Island prison guards on trial for viciously beating inmate

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Nine corrections officers from New York City's Rikers Island prison complex are on trial for the brutal beating of inmate Jahmal Lightfoot on July 11, 2012. They have been charged with attempted gang assault in the first degree, attempted assault, tampering with physical evidence, falsifying business records and official misconduct. The most serious charge, attempted gang assault, could bring the guards sentences of 15 years in prison.

Prosecutors from the Bronx district attorney's office have said that Eliseo Perez, the assistant chief for security, and Captain Gerald Vaughn ordered five other officers to beat Lightfoot after he stared at Perez during a weapons screening. Three other guards kept watch as Lightfoot was placed in a "search cell" without video surveillance.

Lightfoot sustained two broken eye sockets and a broken nose. His eyes were swollen shut because of his injuries. One of the prosecutors, Pishoy Yacoub, told the court, speaking of the defendants, "These men decided enough was enough. They decided they were going to set the tone and make an example."

After the beating, one officer filed a report in which he claimed that he was slashed by an improvised weapon by Lightfoot.

Seven of the officers are currently working at the Rikers complex in functions that have no contact with inmates. A 10th guard will be tried separately for his role in the beating.

The beating of Lightfoot was anything but unusual. Three guards have also been charged with the beating of Gabino Genao on October 30, 2012. These men allegedly handcuffed Genao behind his back and beat him with a truncheon, kicked and punched him because he swore at them.

In another infamous case, on February 15, 2014 a

homeless veteran, Jerome Murdough, died in an overheated cell because of neglect from guards.

In the aftermath of an investigation by the *New York Times* in 2014 and a report issued by the US Attorney's office for Southern New York the same year, which called the conditions at the prison complex a "culture of violence," arrests for corruption and beatings by guards have become more common.

The report by the US Attorney's office found that "force is used against adolescents at an alarming rate"; officers often resort to "'headshots,' or blows to an inmate's head or facial area"; "force is used as punishment or retribution"; "correction officers attempt to justify use of force by yelling 'stop resisting' even when the adolescent has been completely subdued or was never resisting in the first place"; and "use of force is particularly common in areas without video surveillance cameras."

A number of leading political figures in New York, as well as the *New York Times*, have called for the closing of Rikers Island. Such a move would be aimed at whitewashing the systematic abuse throughout the prison system. No substantive suggestions have been made as to what would replace the nearly 10,000-person complex, or how conditions would be any better in another facility or facilities.

Recent reports have revealed similar savagery in the manner in which inmates are treated in other prisons in New York State and nationally. After the escape of two prisoners in June 2015 from the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, NY, the New York governor himself allegedly threatened inmates who were subsequently tortured.

The Democratic Party Mayor of New York City Bill de Blasio has ruled out any significant reform of the prison system, rejecting proposals to close Rikers

Island. He said last month that closing the facility is a “noble concept,” but would be too complex and cost too much. This in a city that has the highest concentration of billionaires on the planet.

The brutality in American prisons serves a definite social purpose. Under conditions of deep and pervasive social inequality, it is part of an apparatus of repression that includes a militarized police force that kills more than 1,000 people a year.

The prison system is an instrument for controlling the working class, particularly its poorest layers. As far as the ruling class is concerned, any modifications to the prison regime will consist of lies and broken promises of reform by Democratic Party politicians or will feature trials, such as the current one in the Bronx, for the most egregious offenses by guards—while the system of repression as a whole is maintained.



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