

Protests erupt following brutal police killing in Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Tom Hall
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Tuesday's execution-style murder of 37-year-old Alton Sterling by police in Baton Rouge, the capital and second-largest city in Louisiana, is the latest in a long series of brutal killings by police in the United States.

Sterling was the 595th person killed by police since the start of the year, according to the web site Killed by Police (two killings were recorded by the site later in the same day, bringing the total to 597). It was the third killing this year in Baton Rouge alone, a smaller city with a population of only 230,000, already matching last year's total. Nationwide, there have been more police killings through July 7 than there were at the same time last year, when the total number reached 1,208.

The killing of Sterling, who was African American, touched off a wave of protests and became a major story in the national press. However, had Sterling's death not been captured on video by bystanders, as is the case with the vast majority of police killings, it would almost certainly have been swept under the rug, with the lying police version of events accepted without question.

Sterling was a father of five who had been living in a homeless shelter for the past several months. He lived day-to-day off of money from selling CDs outside of a local convenience store in a poor, working class area of the city. He was a regular fixture at the location. Residents who spoke to the press remembered Sterling as a friendly and helpful person who regularly gave away CDs and money for food in spite of his own poverty.

Sterling was at his usual spot shortly after midnight on July 5 when he was approached by two Baton Rouge police officers, since identified as Blane Salamon and Howie Lake II, both of whom are white. They were allegedly responding to a 911 call stating that Sterling had threatened someone with a gun. While Sterling did own and was apparently carrying a gun, which is legal in Louisiana, store owner Abdullah Muflahi disputed this allegation, telling CNN that he did not hear Sterling get in

an altercation with anybody. "Just five minutes before, he walked into the store getting something to drink, joking around, [and we were] calling each other names," Muflahi said.

What happened next was captured on cell phone video by eyewitnesses in a nearby parked car. (A second video was released yesterday.) The officers shot Sterling with a taser and wrestled him violently to the ground. Then, while he was pinned to the ground by the two officers, one of them shouted, "He's got a gun!," prompting them to pump several rounds into Sterling from point blank range while he lay in a prone and subdued position on the pavement.

Muflahi, who witnessed the killing, denied police claims that Sterling was reaching for his gun when he was shot, insisting that he "was not holding his gun or touching his pockets during the incident," according to the *Advocate*. This statement is confirmed by the video footage.

Protests began at the scene soon afterward and are ongoing. The crowd swelled to several hundred as the protests continued throughout Tuesday and into early Wednesday morning, and demonstrators briefly succeeded in stopping traffic at the adjacent intersection. The folding table from which Sterling sold his CDs was turned into a makeshift memorial, where people wrote their condolences and left mementos behind.

Sterling's family held an emotional press conference Wednesday morning in front of City Hall, calling for the arrest of the officers and for other eyewitnesses to step forward. "I for one will not rest and will not allow you all to sweep him in the dirt, until the adequate punishment is served to all parties involved," said Quinyetta McMillon, the mother of Sterling's oldest child, Cameron Sterling, choking back tears.

The official response to the killing of Sterling has followed a familiar and time-tested routine. Behind a

screen of hand-wringing and declarations that they will get to the bottom of the incident, the political establishment is preparing to whitewash the killing and defend the powers of the police.

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards and the Baton Rouge police held separate press conferences on Wednesday morning following that of the family's, feigning sympathy for Sterling's relatives and promising a "thorough" and "impartial" investigation, which Edwards announced would be conducted by the federal Justice Department.

The involvement of the Justice Department, which cleared Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in its "independent" civil rights investigation of the killing of Michael Brown, is the surest sign that a cover-up of the crime is being prepared. Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden told reporters that he had already received calls of "support" from President Barack Obama and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

According to lawyers for Sterling's family, police immediately confiscated the recordings of the killing made by the store's security cameras. "If not for [smart phone manufacturers], maybe we wouldn't be here today right now," attorney and state representative Edmond Jordan said at Wednesday's press conference. Body-camera footage, which was touted after the Michael Brown murder as a cure-all solution to police brutality, is apparently not available, as is frequently the case in instances of police brutality. Police claim improbably that the body cameras "fell off" of the officers when they jumped Sterling.

While police have not yet been deployed against protesters, Edwards repeatedly warned them during his press conference that "it's urgent that they remain peaceful." This is a coded threat that if the protests escape the control of the political establishment and the Democratic Party, they will be met with riot police and the National Guard, as happened in Ferguson and Baltimore, where military-style occupations were justified on the basis of isolated or unsubstantiated claims of "violence."

Sections of the Democratic Party, "civil rights" leaders and practitioners of identity politics have been deployed in an attempt to contain the protests. At the Sterling family's press conference, Baton Rouge NAACP Leader Michael McClanahan declared Sterling's murder the result of "1 percent of bad police officers" and called on Baton Rouge Police Chief Carl Dabadie Jr to resign. The NAACP has also called for the hiring of more black

police officers.

Congressman Cedric Richmond, a black Democrat whose district covers parts of Baton Rouge, called on the Justice Department to investigate the killing yesterday, before it was announced by Edwards.

Whatever role racism may play in particular acts of police violence, the explosive growth of police killings is a class, not a racial question. It is the consequence of a deliberate policy of bolstering the repressive powers of local police departments. American police forces have been virtually transformed into paramilitary groups that view the population as a hostile force, armed to the teeth with hi-tech weaponry, including billions of dollars worth of military hardware loaned to them for free by the Pentagon.

Baton Rouge has a poverty rate of 25 percent, ten points above the already-high national average. A mere 80 miles to the southeast, in the major port city of New Orleans, the ruling elite seized upon Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster compounded by decades of neglect, by remaking the city in the interests of the rich, most notably by converting almost the entire public school system into privately-run charter schools. The New Orleans Police Department gained international infamy for numerous atrocities its officers committed during Hurricane Katrina.

Sterling's death follows a long chain of high-profile police killings, including of Eric Garner in Staten Island on July 17, 2014; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014; 12 year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio on November 22, 2014; Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina on April 4, 2015; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland on April 19, 2015.

The Obama administration responded to these high-profile police killings by backing the repression of protests while pledging police "reform." While the reign of police violence continues, the issue had largely been dropped by the corporate-controlled media. It has also been downplayed in the presidential election campaign. President Obama, in a campaign rally for Hillary Clinton on Tuesday, reiterated his complacent statement that "America is really great [right now]." The killing of Alton Sterling, which occurred only hours before, exposes the brutal reality of class relations in the United States.



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