Off-duty police officer pulls gun and fires at youths, sparking protests in Anaheim, California

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Two videos shot from different angles depict a still-unidentified, off-duty Los Angeles police officer drawing a pistol and firing a round during what started as a trivial confrontation with about a dozen-and-a-half teenagers who were walking home from school Tuesday afternoon in a residential neighborhood in Anaheim, California. (The videos of the assault can be viewed here and here.)

Anaheim police responded to the shooting by arresting two of the youths, while protecting the shooter who, were he not a police officer, would likely have been charged with attempted murder, as fortunately the bullet did not hit anyone.

Tuesday's events recall an incident almost exactly one year ago, when Anaheim police officers sided with Ku Klux Klan demonstrators who stabbed counter-demonstrators, letting the KKK members go free while arresting their victims.

Release of the videos on the YouTube Wednesday triggered a spontaneous demonstration, including some acts of vandalism, by over 300 protesters in front of the officer's house.

About 100 heavily armed officers and deputies from various agencies responded in what could appropriately be characterized as a massive law enforcement counter-demonstration. Pictures posted on social media show officers in tactical gear and armed with shotguns forming a protective line in front of the house.

By midnight Tuesday, 23 people, including six juveniles, were under arrest, mostly for failing to obey an unlawful dispersal order.

The response recalls protests that broke out in the largely working-class community of 330,000 during the summer of 2012, after six deadly police shootings within seven months. Using scattered acts of vandalism during those protests as a pretext, Anaheim police attacked demonstrators with billy clubs, tear gas and rubber bullets, and made dozens of arrests.

Both videos show a large, muscular man with a shaved head and dark glasses holding 13-year-old Christian Dorscht, who appears less than half the man's size, by the shirt collar. For over two minutes the man never identified himself as a police officer, nor explained why he would not let the boy go.

Angry words were exchanged. The man accused the boy of threatening to shoot him. Even were such words said, and they are not on either video, no one could take such a statement seriously under the circumstances. The boy can be heard denying the threat, and telling the officer that he was only standing up for a young girl whom the officer had called a highly vulgar name.

While the two argued back and forth, exchanging insults and profanities, other youth stood nearby watching the officer's puerile behavior incredulously. A voice can be heard saying the obvious, "Hey, bro, chill, he's a kid." Eventually a larger boy—still much smaller than the officer—moved in and tried to free Dorscht by pushing the officer, who held onto the boy as both fell over a small hedge.

The officer popped to his feet. After another young man stepped in and took a swing, the officer pulled out his pistol and fired, causing youth to scatter in fear.

Anaheim police officers arrived and took all the remaining children into custody. They booked Dorscht at Orange County Juvenile Hall for making criminal threats, and arrested the 15-year-old who tried to free him from the clutches of the officer for assault and battery. They took 17 other youths to the police station

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for questioning. Many parents complained about being treated rudely when they came to pick up their children.

One of the young witnesses, Gregory Perez, 16, explained to local media, “The little kid said, ‘I’m going to sue you,’ and then the guy thought he said, ‘I’m going to shoot you.’ That’s when he started grabbing the little kid.”

According to Anaheim Police Department spokesperson Daron Wyatt, the off-duty officer “asked them to stay off the property,” but on Tuesday, “it happened again, and it led to a verbal confrontation between the off-duty officer and a group of individuals.”

“My understanding from the statements was that the round was not fired at anyone, was not even fired in the direction of the individuals involved, but may have been more towards the ground,” Wyatt said in defense of the off-duty officer. Using novel reasoning for not arresting someone who commits a crime of violence, Wyatt said to the media, “We know how to find him, where to find him.”

Wyatt has his own history of violence. During a 2009 narcotics investigation he hopped into a van and shot the driver, Adolph Gonzalez, in the head as the van rolled slowly forward, claiming that he needed to do so to prevent himself from being kidnapped.

An opinion by an eleven-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit called Wyatt’s description of the shooting “physically impossible” and ordered him to stand trial for excessive force. The case remains pending in Los Angeles federal court.

Jennifer Rojas of the ACLU of Southern California said her organization was “deeply disturbed” by the videos and police reaction and demanded “a full explanation of why, in an altercation between the police officer and youths, the youths were arrested but not the officer who fired his gun.”

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