

Trump Justice Department: No charges in police murder of Alton Sterling

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A federal prosecutor announced Wednesday that the Department of Justice would not bring federal civil rights charges against the two white police officers who shot and killed 37-year-old Alton Sterling in July last year while he was selling CD's outside a Baton Rouge, Louisiana convenience store.

Baton Rouge Acting US Attorney Corey Amundson announced at a press conference that investigators had found "insufficient evidence" to warrant a prosecution.

Shortly after Wednesday's announcement, Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landy announced that Louisiana State Police would now begin their own investigation, nine months after the killing, having been prohibited from investigating until the federal probe had concluded.

Sterling, who was African-American, had been selling CDs outside the Triple S Food Mart in a poor working class area of the city, struggling to get by day-to-day. Shortly after midnight on July 5 Sterling was approached by two Baton Rouge police officers, Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake. They were reportedly responding to a 911 caller who said that Sterling had threatened someone with a gun.

While Sterling was armed with a gun, as is legal in the state of Louisiana, eyewitnesses immediately disputed the police contention that he had threatened the officers or anyone else with his weapon. "He's not that type of person. It would have been a very big problem to pull his gun out," Abdullah Muflahi, the store owner, told the *Daily Beast* shortly after the shooting.

Cell phone videos of the killing show that, after a brief initial encounter, the officers tasered Sterling and then tackled him, slamming him onto the hood of a nearby car and wrestling him to the ground. With Salamoni and Lake pinning Sterling to the ground, one of the officers then yelled out "He's got a gun! Gun!" Salamoni screamed out, "Lake, he's going for the gun!" The officers then pumped six bullets into Sterling. As the officers fall away,

Sterling can be seen lying motionless on the ground with a gaping wound in his chest.

The entire encounter lasted less than 90 seconds. Sterling, a father of five, lay bleeding out on the pavement. He was dead by the time paramedics arrived on the scene a few minutes later.

Salamoni and Lake were placed on paid administrative leave and will remain so until the Louisiana Attorney General completes its own investigation.

While the officers claimed that Sterling had been reaching for a gun, which was pulled from his right front pants pocket by one of the officers after the shooting, none of the videos show him reaching for his pocket.

The prosecutors argued that proving whether the officers violated Sterling's civil rights hinged on whether or not he had reached for his pocket during the confrontation. Despite the video evidence and a number of eye witness accounts, the federal prosecutors claimed they were unable to determine this key fact.

"Given the totality of the circumstances—that the officers had been fighting with Sterling and had attempted less-than-lethal methods of control; that they knew Sterling had a weapon; that Sterling had reportedly brandished a gun at another person; and that Sterling was much larger and stronger than either officer—the Department cannot prove either that the shots were unconstitutional or that they were willful," a DOJ report released Wednesday argued, justifying the brutal killing.

News of the decision not to bring federal charges leaked Tuesday evening, sparking protests outside the store where Sterling was killed as well as in front of the Baton Rouge Police Department headquarters. Three protesters were arrested late Tuesday night, charged with aggravated obstruction of a highway, among other violations.

More protests are expected in the coming days. "It's Rodney King 2.0," Jo Hines, the artists who spray-painted a mural of Sterling on the Triple S convenience store, told

the *Washington Post*. Hines was referring to the acquittal of the police officers responsible for the infamous beating in Los Angeles, caught on tape, which sparked six days of unrest in 1992. “We just haven’t had the riots yet,” he concluded.

Sterling’s murder sparked large protests in Baton Rouge, a mid-sized city of less than 230,000 people, last July. Police in tactical gear assaulted protestors and arrested nearly 200 people over several nights.

Republican President Donald Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions have denounced popular protest against police violence, have pulled back from any pretense of federal oversight of local police forces, and have promised “law and order.” However, the decision not to bring civil rights charges in the Sterling case follows the pattern set by the Obama administration of whitewashing police killings.

The Obama Justice Department sided with the police in every case that came before the Supreme Court. It refused to bring civil rights charges in case after case, including the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The Obama administration also worked with state and local politicians and police forces to suppress mass opposition to police violence.

Even though police killings are a tragic fact of daily life impacting the poor and working class in cities large and small across the United States, prosecutions at the state and federal level are rare, and convictions are even more uncommon.

Only in the rarest occasions are charges brought. Even with clear video evidence, as in the Sterling case, a prosecution is not guaranteed and rarest of all is a criminal conviction. Between 2005 and 2015, there were only 13 police officers convicted of murder or manslaughter for on-duty shootings. Police killed an estimated 1,000 people on average per year during this period.



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