

Notes on Police Violence

Department of Justice clears officers in death of Freddie Gray

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The six police officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray will not face federal civil rights prosecution, the Department of Justice (DOJ) announced on Tuesday.

In a statement, the DOJ declared, “After an extensive review of this tragic event, conducted by career prosecutors and investigators, the Justice Department concluded that the evidence is insufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Officer Caesar Goodson, Officer William Porter, Officer Garrett Miller, Officer Edward Nero, Lt. Brian Rice, or Sgt. Alicia White willfully violated Gray’s civil rights.”

Freddie Gray died after being arrested by Baltimore police on April 12, 2015. He was handcuffed and chained inside a police van without being strapped into a seatbelt. While riding in the van, Gray was mortally wounded, being tossed so violently that his spine was severed.

The murder of Freddie Gray sparked protests across Baltimore and the rest of Maryland in 2015. On the day of his funeral, riots broke out across the city. Firefighters sprayed protesters with hoses, and the total arrested came to 480 people.

In its statement, the Justice Department claimed that to pursue prosecution of the officers “the government would have to disprove these accounts [the officers’ statements] and establish that the officers’ actions or inactions with respect to Gray constituted a willful violation of Gray’s Fourth Amendment or Fourteenth Amendment rights.”

In 2016, the officers were either acquitted or had their charges, ranging from manslaughter, second-degree depraved heart murder, and reckless endangerment, dropped by prosecutors in Baltimore.

This miscarriage of justice is consistent with a long line of acquittals of police officers. A few of them include:

- On December 3, 2014, a grand jury decided not to bring charges against Officer Daniel Pantaleo for

strangling Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York earlier that year.

- Darren Wilson was exonerated twice for shooting and killing the unarmed Michael Brown, first when a grand jury chose not to indict him in November 2014, and later when the Obama Administration’s Justice Department released a March 2015 report claiming his use of force was justified.

- In June 2015, Michigan Sheriff Jonathan Frost was cleared by the county prosecutor of shooting and killing unarmed 17-year-old Deven Guilford at a traffic stop.

- In December 2015, a grand jury declined to bring charges against Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann for killing 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who held a toy pellet gun in a park.

- Milwaukee policeman Dominique Heaggan-Brown was found not guilty of all charges in the fatal shooting of 23-year-old Sylville Smith in June of this year.

- On June 16, 2017, officer Jeronimo Yanez was acquitted in the fatal shooting of Philando Castile in suburban Minneapolis. Yanez claimed that he shot Castile because he thought Castile was reaching for a gun. Castile told Yanez that he had a gun in the car before being shot.

Virginia school board member charges police intimidation

Lakeesha Atkinson, a Portsmouth, Virginia school board member, claims the obstruction of justice charges she is facing are “bogus” and that the Police Department is trying to intimidate her as a community activist.

Atkinson was arrested outside City Hall before a city council meeting.

According to officer A. O’Neill, Atkinson allegedly interfered with an investigation when approaching two individual officers who had detained suspects on the ground. In a petition for a warrant, O’Neill claimed Atkinson “delayed the investigation, not to mention increased the risk of flight due to my attention being drawn away from the persons in custody.”

Atkinson said she was concerned because the two on the ground looked like they could be students. She approached the two and asked how old they were. According to his report, officer O’Neill asked Atkinson to step back three times.

“I said ‘for what,’ and that’s when [the officer] pushed me with one hand,” said Atkinson. She then backed away and recorded the scene from a distance on her cellphone. “I was a concerned citizen,” she said, when asked why she got involved. “Those kids looked like they could be my nephews.”

Atkinson says she did not break the law and plans to fight the charge to clear her name.

“I feel like Portsmouth police is trying to silence me as an activist and using the situation as an intimidation tactic,” she said. “I invest so much time, effort and money in this city.”



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