

Police will not face charges for the 2016 murder of Alton Sterling

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Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry announced yesterday that there will be no murder charges against the two policemen who shot 37-year-old Alton Sterling to death as a third officer held him down. The decision comes on the heels of protest over the police slaying of Stephon Clark in Sacramento, California in his own yard.

Sterling was murdered on July 5, 2016, when Officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake II responded to calls alleging that a man with a gun had been seen outside a Baton Rouge convenience store.

When Salamoni and Lake approached him, Sterling was selling CDs in front of the store. The officers demanded that he place his hands on the hood of a car before wrestling him to the ground. Lake and Salamoni held Sterling down as he struggled against the attack. Salamoni fired three shots into Sterling's chest before rolling off of him. As Sterling struggled to sit upright, Salamoni shot him three more times in the back.

In his report on his investigation and decision not to charge Salamoni and Lake, Landry wrote, "We have concluded that the officers in question acted as reasonable officers under existing law and were justified in their use of force."

Cellphone videos of the murder were circulated widely on social media and engendered widespread outrage. Popular protests surged throughout Baton Rouge almost immediately following Sterling's murder.

Government officials rushed to quell the protests and seething discontent. Democratic governor John Bel Edwards and the Baton Rouge Police Department each held press conferences, with each vowing that Sterling's murder would be investigated thoroughly and impartially. Edwards specified that the US Department of Justice would conduct an

investigation—an entity that has had a long history of siding with police in cases where civilians have been killed, as they did in the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

True to form, the DoJ announced in May 2017 that they would not be charging Salamoni and Lake for violating Sterling's Fourth Amendment protection against the use of unreasonable force. Justice Department prosecutors cited Sterling's large physical size and his struggles against Salamoni's and Lake's manhandling as evidence that the two officers had used reasonable force, as well as the fact that they tasered him seconds before wrestling him to the ground.

The Department of Justice's announcement alluded also to Salamoni's assertion that the officers believed Sterling to be reaching for a gun, notwithstanding the fact that it is lawful to carry a gun in Louisiana, as well as the fact that Sterling was restrained when Salamoni fired the first three bullets into his chest. Sterling was face down on the pavement, struggling to move with bullets lodged in his chest, when Salamoni shot him three more times in the back.

Attorney General Landry drew upon the Department of Justice's decision in his deliberations. He stated that Salamoni and Lake made "well-founded and reasonable" attempts to restrain Sterling's hands until Lake claimed he saw Sterling reaching for a gun—by which point he had already been shot. According to Landry, Salamoni had "warned" Sterling not to move. What he actually said was, "If you move, I swear to God..."

Sterling's family has also claimed that video shows Salamoni telling Sterling that he would shoot him in the head and calling him "bitch."

Landry attempted to deflect the anticipated anger over his decision by adding that Salamoni and Lake could

still face repercussions for Sterling's killings. Sterling's family has filed a wrongful death suit in civil court against Salamoni and Lake.

Baton Rouge Police Chief Murphy Paul, who is African American, stated on Tuesday that Salamoni and Lake would be facing administrative investigations later this week and urged the public to have "just a little more patience," no doubt mindful of the protests that erupted after Sterling's murder and again after the Department of Justice concluded its investigation. If Salamoni and Lake are terminated from the Baton Rouge Police Department, it will be nothing more than a public hand-washing ploy by the city.

Baton Rouge Mayor Sharon Weston Broome urged the public not to protest Landry's decision, saying, "I'm confident the chief will act expeditiously and fairly in his own investigation." Regardless of what happens to Salamoni and Lake, the decision not to prosecute them is a signal to police officers nationwide that they can continue to kill and brutalize with impunity.

Paul, who was installed by Broome last year, has spoken about being unfairly targeted by police in the past, as if he, as a black man, is peculiarly situated to address the murder of civilians by his employees. In fact, his calls for "patience" reveal him, like Broome, to be an instrument of state repression.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 2016, "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."



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