

Mississippi: No charges for police officers who fatally shot worker in address mix-up

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A grand jury in DeSoto County, Mississippi last week declined to return charges against three police officers involved in the July 2017 killing of 41-year-old Ismael Lopez, an auto mechanic of Mexican descent who was shot in the head when police mistook his residence for that of a neighbor, who was wanted on domestic violence charges.

According to the Southaven Police Department (SPD), Lopez sicced his dog on plainclothes officers and then pointed a firearm at them from a slit in his doorway, ignoring their repeated warnings to drop his weapon. Lopez, who had no prior criminal record and served as a mentor to troubled youth in the community, was killed by a single gunshot wound to the back of his head and was found inside his house.

To this day, the identities of the officers involved in Lopez's killing have not been publicly released. Last year, Lopez family attorney Aaron Neglia announced that a "reliable source" within the SPD had given him the names of two officers thought to be involved in the killing, but the department would not corroborate.

According to Lopez's wife, Claudia Lopez, her husband did not have a gun on his person when police killed him, though he did own weapons for self-defense. At the time of her husband's death, Mrs. Lopez was forcibly dragged out of her house in undergarments, past the lifeless body of her husband, and forced to remain inside a police vehicle. She endured police questioning for hours before even being informed that her husband was dead.

Other witnesses have asserted that police failed to announce themselves before opening fire on Lopez, who would have been within his legal rights to suspect a robbery was underway and act accordingly.

The decision to deny charges against Lopez's killers comes nearly a year after his death sparked protests and

opposition within the city of Southaven, a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee. In the lead-up to the grand jury's results, both the SPD and the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation (MBI) sought to delay the release of their reports of the killing.

Murray Wells, the legal representative of the Lopez family, accused Mississippi government officials last December of seeking to have the killing of Lopez buried—waiting until national attention shifted elsewhere before making their results public. "I think they know there is going to be a storm coming," he said to the local NBC affiliate at the time, adding, "There is no rational explanation for why it takes five months to release these findings. We suspect it's more about letting this matter fade into the mist."

It took an additional seven months for the findings to be released.

In addition to the failure of local and state investigators to promptly turn over their findings, the coroner's report was criticized by the district attorney as being "very poorly written" and having "nothing in it."

According to CBS News, the state of Mississippi medical examiner's office has been underfunded and faces political opposition within the state and local legislatures. "For years, north Mississippi's coroners have had only one place to send a body for an autopsy, the state crime lab in Pearl. Now, due to understaffing and an overcrowded lab, those coroners are being asked to hold bodies." The report goes on: "It's been the universal anthem for state departments, 'we need more funding,' and the crime lab in Pearl is another example."

Despite these weaknesses in the investigative process, DeSoto County District Attorney John Champion effectively washed his hands of the Lopez case,

declaring, “The grand jury was given all of the evidence and they decided not to indict. ... From my perspective, the case is closed at this point.” Contradicting his statement, Champion admitted that he had not communicated his criticisms of the coroner’s report to the grand jury, despite having representatives of the coroner’s office testify.

Champion also stated that no officer involved in the killing had been required to testify before the grand jury. At an earlier time, Champion had declared that he did “not believe [the officers] identified themselves” at Lopez’s door.

Neighbors and family expressed anger at the grand jury’s decision. “It’s too heartbreaking for the people that know [Ismael and Claudia] and their families,” said neighbor Johnny Lee Swinford to a local Fox News affiliate. Neighbor J.C. Collins stated that the residents of Southaven deserve “a better justice system” while hoping that a planned civil lawsuit can deliver justice for Lopez. “They’re Mexican, they can’t do anything. They can’t do justice for what they did,” said neighbor Angelica Jimenez through a translator.

Expressing the widespread contempt for the lives of working-class people within the political establishment, the same day that the grand jury released its findings, Southaven Mayor Darren Musselwhite issued a public statement, declaring: “It has been very disheartening to watch the persecution of our officers by some both prematurely and inaccurately. A picture painted with partial and inaccurate information is easy to create and very influential when strategically circulated through media avenues, but can be very misleading and dangerous to those that value the truth.”

The lawless reign of police brutality is imposed on all sections of the working class. According to the aggregator website killedbypolice.net, as of last month over 600 people were murdered by police throughout the United States in 2018, a number significantly higher than the same period last year.



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