

Portland officials fail to indict two university police for murder of 45-year-old worker

Kayla Costa
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More than two months after the police murder of 45-year-old postal worker Jason Washington, a local grand jury in the state of Oregon has declined to indict the two Portland State University (PSU) officers, Shawn McKenzie and James Dewey, who killed him.

The Multnomah County District Attorney's office announced their decision Thursday, based on an investigation by the Portland Police Bureau, which defends the officers for acting in "self-defense and/or the defense of a third person."

"We want those responsible for the death of my husband to be held accountable," Washington's widow Michelle told local press in the wake of the decision. "We will always remember and love Jason and know he was needlessly killed while attempting to keep the peace."

McKenzie and Dewey, two of fourteen armed officers at the school, shot Washington multiple times in the back after intervening in a fight outside a bar on the PSU campus in the early hours of June 29. According to witness and investigative reports, Washington intervened in a physical fight between his friends and another group when his gun fell from its holster. It is legal to carry a concealed handgun in Washington state, and Jason Washington had a legal permit to do so at the time he was killed.

The police body camera footage, which was not released until Friday, supports bystander footage and testimonies in showing the brutality with which the officers carried out his death. Quickly attempting to pick up his weapon, Washington turned his back toward the officers. They responded by rapidly firing at least ten shots, one second after shouting, "Drop your weapon! Drop your weapon! We'll shoot you."

Contrary to the local police investigation, there were no indications of hostility, aggressiveness or advances

by Washington against the officers that would explain their need to "defend themselves." It is not even clear from the video that he held a gun in his hand.

Rahmat Shoureshi, president of PSU, said in a video statement from Friday, "We are determined to really learn from this unfortunate and tragic incident." He explained that the university is hiring two firms, the OIR Group and Margolis Healy, for "independent investigations" into the recent incident as well as campus security overall.

The university hopes that these investigations will quell opposition among students and city residents in the wake of Washington's death, saying that they will consider factors on "both sides" of the debate in order to decide if the campus police should stay armed.

University officials recently gave a similar explanation to justify their original vote to arm campus police. The Board of Trustees of Portland State University, a state-appointed body of mostly business and political elites, voted to arm officers in the Campus Public Safety Office (CPSO) in June 2015 in the face of broad opposition among students and faculty to the proposal. More than half of students and faculty did not want armed security or did not know such developments were underway.

Officials explained that their antidemocratic decision came out of weighing the opposition against "other factors, such as campus safety needs, law enforcement options and risks, and national best practices." According to the administrators and trustees, armed officers have the ability to curb sexual assault, respond to mental health crises, and minimize the impacts of/or prevent mass shootings, such as the one that claimed nine lives at Umpqua Community College in Oregon in October 2015.

Supposedly, armed officers are also more sensitive to

the “unique challenges” of the diverse student body and surrounding residents in the urban downtown location of the school. Monica Rimai, vice president of the Office of Finance and Administration when the board made the decision, stated that a campus officer should be seen as “somewhere between a police officer and a social worker.”

One of the factors with the greatest immediate influence was the fact that PSU was one of the only public universities that had yet to build its own sworn and armed police department. “Hundreds of campuses across the country have armed police,” CPSO wrote in a recent statement from July 2. “In fact, before the new policy, Portland State was the only public American University with more than 15,000 students without a dedicated police force.”

The university states these facts as if they are logical, when in fact they speak to the reactionary and militarized response of the ruling class to growing social unrest rooted in the crisis of the capitalist system. Far from being a rational decision or a tragic mistake, the killing of Jason Washington is a direct consequence of the highly developed and well-funded police apparatus that has been built up in cities and schools across the United States and internationally.

Since the mass student and workers’ struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ruling class has worked to drastically expand the material capabilities and reach of the police in American society. Initiatives backed by both the Democratic and Republican parties have resulted in the ubiquity of heavily militarized police departments in all fifty states, including on and around the campuses of most colleges and universities.

Nearly all public four-year colleges with more than 2,500 students have their own sworn law enforcement agency, with their officers armed with guns, Tasers, pepper spray and batons. More than 70 percent of campus police agencies can exercise authority off campus, aiding local police departments in overseeing working-class residents and students outside their geographic limits.

While underreported in the mainstream press, killings of youth and workers by college campus police are not uncommon. The death of Washington follows the murders by campus police of fourth-year student Scout Schultz at Georgia Tech University in 2017, 43-year-old Samuel DuBose at the University of Cincinnati in

Ohio in 2015, and 18-year-old college freshman Gil Collar at the University of South Alabama in 2012.

In the first seven months of 2018, at least 720 people have been killed by police. At an average pace of more than three deaths per day, this year will be among the deadliest years for police killings in the United States. Even in the city of Portland, Oregon, which is dominated by Democrats and self-proclaimed “progressives,” university and local police are granted the same impunity to harass, intimidate and kill workers and young people.

Demands for the disarmament and dismantling of campus police will find no active support within the administration, campus safety office, or local or state government officials. Youth and students can only fight against the militarization of schools and society more broadly through an appeal to the working class in a direct confrontation with the capitalist system, which the police apparatus has been established to defend. Such a confrontation demands a fight for genuine socialism, based on an international, independent and unified movement of the working class.



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