

16 Shots: Documenting the Chicago Democratic Party's cover-up of the police murder of Laquan McDonald

Michael Walters, Kristina Betinis
3 August 2019

16 Shots, written and directed by Rick Rowley and produced by Jacqueline Soohen and Jamie Kalven

16 Shots is a documentary directed by Rick Rowley for the subscription channel Showtime about the city of Chicago's official cover-up of the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald by Chicago Police Department (CPD) Officer Jason Van Dyke.

Through powerful interviews with family members, witnesses to the murder, jurors at Van Dyke's trial, as well as attorneys, city officials and activists, the timeline of events of McDonald's murder and its official cover-up is reconstructed.

The film also includes damning interviews with city, state and local officials speaking on police crime and the ensuing political crisis that enveloped Democratic Party officialdom. The contempt officials hold for the population of Chicago as a whole is barely concealed, and on occasion they express their fury over the truth having come to light. The film should be seen widely but also has its limitations, which we review below.

Murder of Laquan McDonald

On October 20, 2014, Chicago police arrived on 40th Street on the city's southwest side, based on a complaint of a person with a knife breaking into cars. The initial responding officer followed McDonald for several blocks while waiting for a taser. Seconds after Officer Jason Van Dyke arrived on the scene and exited his car, he fired sixteen shots over about fifteen seconds into McDonald, who had his back turned and was walking away from Van Dyke. All of these facts were systematically falsified by police and covered up by city officials, who would later pay the McDonald family an unprecedented \$5 million in blood money.

As the truth came to light—that CPD, the office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the Cook County Coroner's office and the city council had orchestrated a cover-up of the murder—Mayor Emanuel fired Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy, and a handful of elected officials were ousted. Jason Van Dyke was also tried and convicted.

How the truth came to light

The film opens with an audio recording of both the police radio from October 20, 2014 and an interview with then-Fraternal Order of Police spokesman Pat Camden. The press conference on this shooting was one of

an estimated 500 similar press conferences Camden conducted over his 40-year career.

"A police department has to be first in the media," Camden explains. "It is incumbent that they are the ones that are putting out the information." The corporate media unquestioningly parroted the false public statements they were fed in this case by Camden.

The police reported that McDonald was shot just once in the chest, after he "lunged" at Van Dyke and his partner with a knife, actions Camden characterized as "a very serious threat to the officers, and he leaves them no choice at that point to defend themselves." These statements all proved to be false when the dashcam footage was released to the public in November 2015.

In a moving scene early in the film, McDonald family member Pastor Marvin Hunter declares, "I thought there's nothing we could do. The coroner released the body to the funeral home. The funeral home called me and said there are a lot of holes in this kid. The story this kid was shot one time, that ain't what happened."

After the funeral home revelations, the family retained attorney Jeffrey Neslund. In the film, Neslund contrasts a normal murder investigation, where formal witness statements are recorded, with this case. The film shows that witnesses to McDonald's murder were interrogated for several hours, and the only record is in informal police notes that state the witnesses didn't see anything. It was also discovered that police had erased 86 minutes of security camera footage from the Burger King across the street from the murder.

Witness Jose Torres recalls saying to his son Xavier, "Why the fuck are they still shooting him? He's on the ground." And Alma Benitez recalls yelling, "Stop shooting. He's dead already."

In the aftermath of the shooting, police took the witnesses to the precinct and put them in separate rooms, attempting to convince them to change their account of the shooting to match the police narrative. Police reviewed files on the witnesses and they were interrogated until at least 4 a.m., more than 6 hours after the shooting.

At that time and for months to come, the witnesses feared police retaliation. Benitez says, "If I didn't tell them what I thought they wanted to hear I definitely thought I was going to jail." Torres recalls that when renowned journalist Jamie Kalven tracked him down and showed up at his door, he explains that he thought "the police were here to get me."

In a stunning scene, Neslund explains how CPD released the footage (obtained through subpoena) of Van Dyke murdering McDonald, thus blowing CPD's own cover story. Neslund told *Time* in 2015, referring to the police murders of Freddie Gray and Walter Scott: "What's on that video is so much more graphic than what we saw from Baltimore or South Charleston."

The dashcam footage so exposed the official story that the Chicago City

Council, on the advice of Mayor Rahm Emanuel's top attorney, voted unanimously in April 2015 to approve a \$5 million settlement, before McDonald's family filed suit. As a condition of the settlement, the video footage of the murder was to remain undisclosed.

When the video was released to the public in November 2015 by court order, after a series of Freedom of Information Act Requests and a lawsuit by activist Will Calloway, it sparked months of protests. Jason Van Dyke was also charged at that time.

Protests and political crisis

As the Van Dyke trial progresses in the film, it focuses also on the demonstrations by groups such as Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project 100 and Assata's Daughters. When asked what their demands are, Charlene Carruthers, National Director of BYP100, responds: "Fire Garry McCarthy, Rahm Emanuel resign, Anita Alvarez we will vote you out of office."

With McCarthy fired, Cook County State's Attorney Alvarez defeated by Kim Foxx and Emanuel choosing to not seek a third term in 2019, the activists declare victory. Carruthers said: "The unseating of Anita Alvarez, the decision of Rahm Emanuel to not run for reelection. Heads rolled with this verdict. We did that. So what else is possible now?"

After the conviction of Van Dyke, Calloway claimed that, "Everything changes after today."

Kalven began investigating the shooting and asked a source in county government to provide him with a copy of the autopsy report. The source, who remains unnamed in the film, was likely Democrat and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, who recently lost the Chicago mayoral runoff election to challenger Lori Lightfoot. The Medical Examiner's Office of Cook County sits below Preckwinkle, who is thanked in the movie credits. Preckwinkle's political career spans over 30 years, during which time hundreds have been shot, tortured and murdered by police.

McDonald was murdered five months before the 2015 Chicago municipal elections, in which the deeply unpopular Mayor Rahm Emanuel would be locked in a close runoff with Cook County Board member Jesus "Chuy" García. Just as Emanuel had an interest in suppressing the murder, other factions of the Democratic Party were seeking to exploit it. The film demonstrates clearly that the cover-up was well known within the Chicago and Cook County Democratic Party leadership.

The murder and cover-up are viewed simply as the responsibility of individuals, however. The enormous social inequality wracking the city, and the increasingly authoritarian Democratic Party rule that oversees it, are not examined. This obscures the most essential truth: that current levels of social inequality are incompatible with democratic forms of rule, and this is why the police murder with near-impunity.

Missing from the film is the direct political responsibility of the city's then-top official, Rahm Emanuel, a former investment banker and once chief of staff to President Barack Obama. Indeed Obama is referred to only indirectly, when Calloway mentions "the 44th president."

Despite the attention drawn to the murder of Laquan McDonald, none of the factors that contributed to it or to the deaths of thousands of other workers and youth executed yearly by police have changed. Anita Alvarez has been replaced by Kim Foxx, a black woman. Emanuel was replaced by Lori Lightfoot, in an election that saw record low voter turnout, particularly in the South and West sides of the city. The new mayor earlier headed the taskforce charged with investigating the McDonald cover-up, producing a report that indicated what everyone knows: the Chicago police are indeed lethally violent and racist.

McCarthy was replaced by African-American Superintendent Eddie

Johnson, who has continued to operate the off-the-books detention center in Homan Square.

Also missing from the documentary is any extended discussion of Laquan McDonald and his background. Most of the information about him is provided by Calloway: "Laquan was a young black child from the west side of Chicago who ended up being murdered on the south side of Chicago. I come from the same background as Laquan. I was a ward of the state. . . He had a troubled life. Never in a million years did I think it would have had this type of effect on the city or country."

The film closes with the footnote that the officers tried for conspiracy were acquitted and that Van Dyke was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison, with the judge ignoring the 16 counts of aggravated battery. Commenting on the judge's decision, a juror stated that the battery counts were "taken away as though it never happened. The system is so jacked up. I'm glad I did my job but I feel betrayed."

Bound up with the weaknesses already mentioned, the documentary treats racism and police violence as eternal, unchanging features of social life. The solution, to the extent there is one, is electing African-American mayors and appointing African-American police commissioners. This covers up the responsibility of the Democratic Party itself, to which filmmaker Rowley and journalist Kalven are oriented.

Rick Rowley told the *Chicago Tribune*: "What becomes visible here is just this whole machinery that makes these cases disappear and that includes hundreds of people who all, in their small ways, believe that they are just doing their job. Not just in the police department, but in the prosecutor's office, in the mayor's office, in the media itself, in the general public. And it's only at the end when you're able to step back and see ... this totality that we all realize that we participated in some way in the atrocity."

This is a simplistic perspective that indicts everyone, both the machinery of the state as well as ordinary people who have no responsibility for what is done in their name. Such an approach, pushed by those advocating racial politics, ignores the class interests represented by the Democratic Party city establishment and obstructs the unity of the working class that is needed to deal with the epidemic of police violence and the racism being promoted at the highest levels of the US government.

Despite these serious limitations, *16 Shots* effectively documents a horrific example of the attacks facing the working class, and for this reason remains an important and worthwhile film.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact