

Maryland police officer faces murder charges after shooting handcuffed man seven times inside patrol car

Harvey Simpkins
1 February 2020

On Monday night, a Maryland police officer in the eastern suburbs of Washington, D.C. shot 43-year old William Green seven times while he was handcuffed, with his arms behind his back, and seated in the front seat of the officer's police car.

With highly unusual swiftness, Prince George's County police charged the officer, Michael Owen, 31, with second-degree murder and manslaughter within 24 hours of the shooting. At a Tuesday press conference Prince George's County police chief Hank Stawinski admitted that he was "unable to come to our community this evening and offer you a reasonable explanation for the events that occurred last night. I have concluded that what happened last night is a crime."

At a court hearing Wednesday, a judge denied Owen bond, on the grounds that he is a danger to the community. State's Attorney Aisha N. Braveboy told the *Washington Post* that a grand jury will be convened in the case and she promised a full investigation.

Owen and another cop initially alleged that Green was under the influence of phencyclidine, known as PCP, when they arrested him after responding to reports of a car slamming into parked vehicles. According to police, when the officers arrived, Green was passed out behind the wheel of his vehicle. Stawinski stated at the press conference announcing the officer's arrest that "We do not believe PCP was involved."

In other words, Owen and his partner lied in an attempt to justify Green's murder. Owen and the other officer also told police investigators that a struggle ensued in the police car before Green was shot. Stawinski, however, said, "That was not corroborated."

The charging of officer Owen is the rare exception in police killings. Between 2005 and 2015, the *Washington Post* found that only 54 police were charged, despite close to 1,000 police killings every year in the United States. That works out to police facing charges in well under 1 percent of

cases, with convictions or jail time even less common.

Owen, who joined the police in 2009, had a history of suspicious shootings. In 2011, he fatally shot 35-year-old Rodney Edwards. Owen alleged at the time that, as he was leaving an event, he saw Edwards lying on the side of a road and stopped to check on him. According to Owen, Edwards pulled a gun, causing Owen to shoot him multiple times. After an investigation, police declared Owen's actions justified. Prince George's County prosecutors say they are now reviewing the 2011 shooting.

In 2009, Owen claimed that a person tried to rob him outside his home while he was off-duty. According to police, the would-be robber shot at him and Owen fired back, at which point the would-be robber fled.

Green, Owen's latest victim, was a Megabus luggage loader. According to John Mathis, whose mother was engaged to Green, he was slated to be promoted to dispatcher the day after he was shot. Green also leaves behind two adult children.

"We have a lot of questions," Mathis told the *Washington Post*, adding that the initial suggestion of PCP use "wasn't like him."

At a Thursday press conference, Green's mother, Brenda Green stated through tears, "I am here for my son, William Green. He needs justice because it's just not right. I love and miss my son. I will not see my son again."

The day after the shooting, Green told a local ABC affiliate, "How you gonna shoot somebody sitting in a front seat of a car in handcuffs and with a seat belt on? Why would you do that?"

At the Thursday press conference, Green's daughter, also named Brenda Green, said, "I am the true definition of a daddy's girl who no longer has her daddy with her. I dreamt of the day my daddy could be able to walk me down the aisle and I wanted him to be able to see his future grandchildren. But that day will never come now."

Attorney William Murphy, representing the Green family,

told the *Washington Post*, “I have seen a lot of horrible fatal police shootings, but this one is in the top 10.” Murphy also represented the family of Freddie Gray, who died in April 2015 after being subjected to a “rough ride” by Baltimore officers in the back of a police van.

Murphy explained at Thursday’s press conference that the family was pushing for a “thorough investigation not only into the [Green] incident but into the officer’s past uses of force. We ought to look at the police policies which have let this officer continue to serve given his capacity to do what he did two days ago.”

Far from a bad apple, Owen represents the large rotten bushel in the Prince George’s County Police Department (PGPD). The department was the subject of numerous complaints regarding the use of force in the 1990s, leading to federal oversight which lasted until 2009. According to the ACLU of Maryland, the department is again under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice.

In the wake of Green’s murder, the ACLU noted a series of recent violent incidents carried out by PGPD officers, including the September 2019 shooting of Leonard Shand. Police allege they spent 30 minutes “containing” Shand, who was apparently in a disoriented state, and used “less than lethal force” before he was shot and killed. The ACLU noted that “less than lethal force” is not the same thing as de-escalation, nor were any mental health professionals called to the scene in an attempt to peacefully resolve the situation.

During a traffic stop in October, Demonte Ward-Blake was beaten by PGPD officers and paralyzed from the waist down. The ACLU reports that it is not known if any officers were held responsible.

In none of these incidents, including the Green murder, did police wear body cameras. Braveboy, the State’s Attorney, said that just 80 PGPD officers, out of more than 1,500, have body cameras. “We believe that the public should have that high level of transparency, but we only have what we have,” Braveboy told the *Washington Post*.

The ACLU criticized the lack of body cameras in the PGPD. “It is absolutely senseless for full transparency to not be a number one priority for this department,” the ACLU said. “These deaths are completely preventable. Police characterize them as unavoidable, but they are not. And body camera footage will show that.”

The liberal immigrant rights group Casa de Maryland, in line with the ACLU, has also pushed for the use of body cameras. Last year, it advocated for a bill before the Prince George’s County council to require PGPD police to wear body cameras. The bill did not pass. After Green’s killing, Jorge Benitez-Perez, an organizer with Casa de Maryland, emphasized the need for the cameras, telling the *Washington Post*, “There is no accountability without transparency.”

The ACLU of Maryland sought to paint Green’s killing in racialist terms, even though both the police officer and the victim were African-American. In a statement on the Maryland ACLU website, legal director Debbie Jeon stated “Police departments in Maryland—and across the nation—are built on white supremacy and have a serious problem with targeting and harming People of Color, particularly Black people. Just last week, in Stark, MD, a white man who was reported to be a danger to the community, and who shot hundreds of bullets at Harford County Sheriff’s deputies, was arrested—alive ... We must put a stop to systemic police brutality and the needless killings of Black people.”

Focusing the issue solely on race, as liberal and pseudo-left groups do, ignores the fact that, while blacks are disproportionately the victims of police violence, the largest number of victims continue to be white. Connecting the vast majority of those who are killed or wounded by the police is that they are working class or poor, regardless of their race.

Consistent with their efforts to divide the working class along racial lines, such groups instead peddle the myth that “reforms” of the police are possible under the capitalist system, whether through increasing the use of body cameras, pushing for civilian review boards of police activity, or through hiring more minorities into the police.

In fact, the root cause of endless police violence is the capitalist system, which the police operate to uphold, along with all of the dire conditions it produces for the working class—poverty, social inequality and war. Police killings will be stopped only through the unification of the working class in the US and internationally, across all artificial racial, ethnic and national lines, in the fight for a socialist society based on human need and not the profit interests of a rapacious ruling elite, which controls the entire political system and both big business parties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact