

Austin, Texas police critically injure young protesters with “less lethal” beanbag rounds

Matthew Taylor
5 June 2020

Twenty-year-old Austin, Texas, college student Justin Howell was hospitalized on Sunday with life threatening injuries after being shot in the head by police with a beanbag round while participating in a demonstration against police violence. Howell, who is a political science major at Texas State University, was peacefully protesting when officers opened fire upon him at close range. When fellow protesters along with volunteer paramedics attempted to bring the young man to police for medical attention they were fired upon as well.

Volunteer paramedic Meredith Michael vividly described the incident in a Facebook post: “I had my hands in the air, I begged for them to help, they said ‘bring him over here.’ I told them that his head injury was too severe, he was convulsing and unable to move, that I needed their help. ‘You’re going to need to bring him here.’

“Several guys started to carry him, I was clearing the path, with my hands up (crossed wrists, our signal that I was volunteering for the medical tent across the street).

“They started firing into the crowd, and shot my hands, from no more than three feet away. I don’t remember falling to the ground, injuring my shoulder, hip, and neck. I woke up to what seemed like the relentless sound of these ‘less lethal’ bean bags... and my own screaming.”

Austin police claim that another protester near Howell had thrown his backpack and water bottle at them, and that he was their intended target. They described the beanbag rounds, fired from a twelve-gauge shotgun, as “less lethal” munitions.

Howell suffered a fractured skull and brain damage. Howell’s older brother Joshua, who is the opinion editor for the Texas A&M school newspaper the *Battalion*, wrote in an op-ed for the paper that doctors

told him his brother will have a hard time telling left from right when he wakes up.

Howell was just one of several protesters injured by Austin police in Sunday night’s protest. Also critically wounded was 16-year-old Brad Ayala, who had just finished his shift at a nearby sandwich shop and joined the protest when he too was shot in the head by a beanbag round. His sister Valerie Ayala told the *Austin Statesman* that “He’s conscious and in a lot of pain because he was shot right in the middle of his forehead. The bullet stayed inside of his head for five hours. The front of his head is fractured and dented, and he had some bleeding.”

Other protesters were also injured by the beanbag rounds, including a pregnant woman, according to a statement given by Austin Police Chief Brian Manley.

In a press conference held on Monday, Manley offered the usual “thoughts and prayers” to the families of the injured protesters, pledged to investigate the incident and claimed that “This is not what we do as a police department.”

A viewing of the 45-second recording of what followed Howell’s shooting refutes the police chief’s claim. As five of Howell’s fellow protesters carry his limp body to police lines to seek medical care, they are clearly unarmed, and fully visible to the officers that fired upon them at close range. It is clear that the police in Austin made a deliberate decision to use wanton violence on unarmed protesters, in order to terrorize the crowds into submission and deter further opposition to police brutality.

This strategy of mass terror is standard operating procedure for all police departments. Arbitrary arrests and indiscriminate violence are the tools used by police against the working class not just in times of social upheaval, but as an everyday policy to maintain control

over the population and prevent opposition to capitalist exploitation from emerging on a large scale.

The Austin police themselves have a notable history of violence. In 2016 officers shot and killed David Joseph, a black teenager suffering from mental illness, even though he was naked and unarmed. More recently, in April of this year, Austin police killed 42-year-old Mike Ramos after first shooting the unarmed man with a beanbag round in the face and then following up with live rounds as Ramos fled in his car.

The Democratic Party-controlled Austin city council has declared an emergency meeting for Friday to discuss the violence at last weekend's protests, and to discuss ways to bring "accountability and transparency" to policing. This will solve nothing. Like past efforts by city officials across the United States, including mandating body cameras, implementing joint police/citizen oversight boards and hiring more minority officers, whatever changes that may emerge from the city council's discussions will only function as political cover for the police as they continue to brutalize the population.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact