

Four Tacoma, Washington police officers put on administrative leave three months after killing Manuel Ellis

Julio Patron
6 June 2020

The four Tacoma, Washington police officers who were involved in the March 3 death of Manuel Ellis, a 33-year-old black man, were placed on administrative leave on Wednesday, three months after the killing. In March, the officers--Christopher Burbank, Matthew Collins, Masyih Ford and Timothy Rankine--were placed on leave after the incident, but had since returned to duty.

The move to place the four cops on administrative leave comes amid the wave of popular protests against police violence throughout the United States and internationally, sparked by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The investigator for the Pierce County medical examiner's office, Rich O'Brian, found that Ellis had died of respiratory arrest due to hypoxia and physical restraint by the police officers, ruling the death a homicide. Heart disease and the presence of methamphetamine were also listed as contributors to the death.

Ellis, a father of two, can be heard on dispatcher radio calling out while in handcuffs and police custody, "I can't breathe." This is the same plea made by Floyd as a police officer held his knee on Floyd's neck for more than 8 minutes.

At a press conference in Tacoma, Marcia Carter, Manuel Ellis's mother, said, "Manny was taken from me, he was murdered." She had spoken with Ellis half an hour before his death. The Ellis family is calling for the firing of the four officers involved in Manuel's death. Hundreds turned out for a vigil in Tacoma on the night of Wednesday, June 3.

Tacoma Police Department spokesperson Ed Troyer claimed that Ellis was found by police at 11:30 p.m.

banging on car windows. He then approached the police car and asked for help, saying there were warrants out for his arrest. The police allege that when one officer got out of his car, Ellis grabbed him by the vest and threw him to the ground. A second officer got out and managed to get handcuffs on Ellis and pin him to the ground.

Troyer claimed that no knee or chokehold was used, nor a taser or baton. After Ellis said he couldn't breathe, he was rolled onto his side and a medical unit was called in. He died 40 minutes after being restrained.

Contradicting the claims of the Tacoma police department, footage of the arrest posted to the Tacoma Action Collective Twitter account on Friday shows Manuel being beaten to the ground while one officer grabs a taser gun. The woman who recorded the footage can be heard yelling, "Stop hitting him." The video ends with Manuel being restrained on the ground by the police officers.

The woman who recorded the incident, Sara McDowell, has come forward to dispute the claims by the Tacoma police, saying that the police initiated the confrontation. She states that Manuel was speaking to them through the car window when one police officer threw the car door open, knocking him to the ground.

In an attempt to quell the outrage that has been sparked by the video of the encounter and the resulting protests against police brutality and murder, the Democratic mayor of Tacoma, Victoria Woodards, released a video message saying she was "enraged" by what was exposed in the video and that "the officers who committed this crime should be fired and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

As with most Democratic Party officials, she invoked identity politics to put the blame on the population as a whole. The mayor said that “as an African American woman, I didn’t need a video to believe,” adding, “It does take a video for so many people to believe the truth about systemic racism and its violent impact on black lives.” In order to obscure the class lines, she said, “I don’t get to take this skin color off every day. I don’t get to come out a different person. And while I am mayor, I am still black.”

Tacoma police union representatives have called the mayor’s video theatrics and claimed the investigation will show the officers “did no wrong.”

In a fascistic tirade against the outrage caused by police killings, the police union declared, “This is not a time to sacrifice dedicated public servants at the altar of public sentiment, especially when that sentiment is almost wholly fueled by the uninformed anger of a theatrical politician.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact