

No charges in Missouri police murder of 25-year-old Hannah Fizer

Jacob Crosse
17 September 2020

On Monday, three months after 25-year-old Hannah Fizer of Sedalia, Missouri was murdered by a sheriff's deputy while on her way to work, the special prosecutor appointed in the case, Stephen Sokoloff, released a letter announcing that no charges would be brought against the killer cop.

Fizer, who was unarmed, was pulled over by a still publicly unidentified Pettis County Sheriff's deputy on the night of June 13 for speeding and "imprudent driving." In less than 10 minutes, the young woman was dead, having been shot five times by the officer.

In his letter addressed to Judge Jeff Mittlehauser, who is overseeing the case, Sokoloff wrote that "the shooting, albeit possibly avoidable, was justifiable under current Missouri criminal law."

Protesters and family members met outside the Sedalia courthouse on Tuesday night to express their anger and disgust at the state cover-up. Among them was Jessica Fizer, Hannah Fizer's cousin, who spoke to local media. "I was heartbroken, and I hate to say this, but I was not surprised," she said. "I don't think it was justifiable, I do agree it was avoidable."

She continued: "This world needs change, and if we don't stand up, if we the people don't stand up, then we are not going to get that change."

This latest example of class "justice" has received little media coverage. That is largely because it cuts across the Democratic Party narrative, which interprets police violence, along with all other social issues, entirely from a racial standpoint, covering up the more fundamental class issues. Fizer was white, as is the deputy who is believed to have killed her, Jordan Schutte.

Pettis County Sheriff Kevin Bond has refused to publicly identify the deputy who shot Fizer. He released a letter in response to the special prosecutor's report that hailed the investigation and decision as an example of "transparency and thoroughness." Bond wrote: "We at

the Sheriff's Office have allowed Rule of Law to properly take its course, and we await delivery of the report to complete our internal investigation into the matter."

In his letter, Sokoloff acknowledged that "an alternative approach might have avoided the confrontation that led to the officer having to discharge his weapon." He was quick to add, however, that this was not relevant to any criminal liability in the case.

Sokoloff did not provide any new information in his letter that had not already been made public. The letter included the same "self-defense" justification the Sheriff's office released the night of the murder. Fizer is alleged to have threatened to shoot the deputy—with a gun she did not possess—and then "reached down into the floorboard of the car and raised up towards him."

In making his determination, Sokoloff relied on surveillance video from a nearby business, which had no audio. This forced him to piece together the short dispatch call from the deputy with the video to "provide a more complete information package." The surveillance tape, according to Sokoloff, shows Fizer "moving vigorously" in the vehicle before the deputy "assumed a defensive posture" and shot her five times.

Fizer did have a cell phone and repeatedly told the deputy she was recording him. This video, if it exists, has yet to be made public. The state has yet to release any audio of Fizer threatening to shoot the cop.

The long-time prosecutor admitted that his determination to not bring charges was "made somewhat more difficult by the absence of a body-worn camera, with audio, as the video from the adjacent security system, although of good quality for such a system, especially at night, is not totally clear."

In his letter to the judge, Sokoloff blamed Fizer for her own murder, claiming her actions caused a "reasonable belief that he (the officer) is in imminent danger of serious physical injury or death, as a result of the actions

of the suspect.” This type of argument, amounting to a virtual license to kill, has been used by agents of the state for decades to justify their crimes.

Fizer, like a large majority of the over 1,000 people killed by police in the US each year, was on the lower rungs of the income ladder. She had recently been promoted to assistant manager at the convenience store where she worked.

Her long-time boyfriend James Johnson is a production worker for the multi-billion-dollar chicken giant Tyson Foods, which has remained open throughout the pandemic. As of last month, over 10,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported at Tyson Food’s US-based facilities according to the Food & Environment Reporting Network.

The US justice system is designed to shield police from prosecution, as illustrated by the case of Hannah Fizer and hundreds more. While black workers and youth and other minorities are disproportionately the victims of police violence and murder, and racism is certainly widespread among the police, along with other forms of right-wing and backward thinking, police violence is not rooted in “white racism.” Indeed, more whites are killed by police than blacks or other minorities.

Rather, the police are an arm of the capitalist state, the “special bodies of armed men” tasked with protecting the property, wealth and power of the ruling class against the working class. The ongoing multi-racial protests against police killings demonstrate the deeply felt hostility in the working class to racial oppression and support for democratic rights.

The refusal to bring charges in the murder of Fizer coincides with the announcement of a \$12 million settlement of a wrongful death lawsuit in the killing of 26-year-old Louisville, Kentucky nurse Breonna Taylor. The settlement, which Mayor Greg Fischer pointed out does not admit any fault on the part of the city, includes a number of toothless “police accountability reforms,” which Fischer, a Democrat, said illustrated “a renewed commitment to addressing structural and systemic racism in our city and our country.”

No announcement has been made as to whether the police who murdered Taylor in her own home will be charged.

Meanwhile, while the cops who killed Taylor and Fizer are breathing free air, at least seven protesters in Lancaster Pennsylvania remain behind bars after Magisterial District Judge Bruce Roth set their bail at \$1 million, a gross violation of the Eighth Amendment to the

US Constitution, which states that “excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.”

The demonstrators were arrested Monday morning while protesting against the police killing on Sunday of 27-year-old Ricardo Munoz. Munoz suffered from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. He was shot by an unnamed cop after lunging towards him, while appearing to be holding a knife. The police left Munoz’s uncovered corpse lying on the sidewalk for several hours after killing him.

Lancaster Bureau of Police Chief Jarrad Berkihiser urged the judge to set a punitively high bail amount. He said that while “we did not request a specific bail amount... we did request high bail for each individual we arrested due to the serious nature of the riot...”

Jamal Shariff Newman, Barry Jones, Yoshua Dwayne Montague, Matthew Modderman, Talia Gessner, Kathryn Patterson and Taylor Enterline were each charged with several felony and misdemeanor counts and had their bail set at \$1 million. Six others were also arrested, however their bail information has yet to be released as of this writing.

According to a GoFundMe for Enterline, set up by her friend Hailee Paige, Taylor Enterline was working as a medic the night of the protests and has been participating in protests against police violence since 2018.

Reffie Shuford, executive director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, issued a statement on Tuesday calling the bail amount “an egregious and unacceptable abuse of the bail system.” The statement continued, “Cash bail should never be used to deter demonstrators and chill speech.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact