Journalist acquitted of charges related to arrest during 2020 George Floyd protest in Iowa

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Andrea Sahouri, an Iowa-based journalist arrested last year during the wave of protests sparked by the police murder of George Floyd, was found not guilty Wednesday of failing to disperse and interference with official acts. Sahouri, a reporter for the *Des Moines Register*, was arrested on May 31 while covering a demonstration in the state's capital.

Sahouri testified Tuesday that she was tweeting photos and videos of the demonstration as clashes between police and protesters broke out. Officers approached Sahouri and told her to get back, so she continued covering the events from a distance. Sahouri met up with a fellow reporter, Katie Akin, that evening.

As more police arrived, Sahouri told her then-boyfriend Spenser Robnett to move the car they had driven to the area. Soon after, police deployed tear gas on a group that Sahouri happened to be covering. She, Robnett and Akin moved away from the scene and headed toward a Verizon store parking lot to leave the area as demonstrators scattered, she told the court.

As they departed, Robnett was struck in the leg by a tear gas canister, making him temporarily fall to the ground. As Sahouri rounded the corner of the Verizon store, she said that she saw an officer charging toward her and immediately put her hands up.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," Sahouri said. "I said, 'I'm press, I'm press, I'm press.' He grabbed me, pepper-sprayed me and as he was doing so said, 'That's not what I asked.'"

Sahouri described the pepper spray as "extremely painful" and explained that she thought she was going to go blind.

Body camera footage played for jurors before Sahouri testified backed up her account. The video showed Sahouri temporarily blinded and hurting from pepper spray as she repeatedly told police she was a reporter.

"This is my job," Sahouri said in the video. "I'm just doing my job. I'm a journalist."

Robnett also took the stand Tuesday and told jurors he saw officer Luke Wilson spray Sahouri from close range. Robnett approached the officer to say that Sahouri was a journalist. Robnett was subsequently pepper sprayed, knocked to the ground and arrested.

Both Sahouri and Robnett said that they did not hear police issue any order to disperse and that they did not interfere with officers who arrested them. Officers said Sahouri was not wearing a press badge, which she had left in her car. However, the *Des Moines Register*'s executive editor, Carol Hunter, called this excuse a "red herring," saying police knew Sahouri was a journalist.

Wilson, an 18-year Des Moines Police Department veteran, said he arrested Sahouri because she was the only person that remained in the immediate area after police deployed tear gas and pepper spray against protesters. Wilson claimed that Sahouri tried to pull her arm away from him, and that Robnett tried to pull Sahouri away.

Wilson said he did not know Sahouri was a journalist when he approached her. Wilson's body camera was not activated during the arrest because he mistakenly believed it was recording, he said. Department policy requires officers to report when significant incidents are not recorded, which Wilson did not do. Footage used in the trial came from the camera of another officer on the scene with Wilson.

Sahouri's acquittal is a welcome outcome to the bogus charges levied against her and a testament to the support in the general population for democratic rights,

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including a free press. Had she been convicted, Sahouri would have faced up to 30 days in jail and hundreds of dollars in fines for covering the police crackdown on protesters.

The assault and arrest of Sahouri took place during an unprecedented series of attacks on journalists in 2020. According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, she was among the 128 journalists arrested across the country last year.

The arrests include:

· CNN reporter Omar Jimenez and three crew members were arrested during a live broadcast last May. Jimenez was being fully cooperative with police demands, offering to move his reporting location if his crew were in the way, when a group of Minnesota state patrolmen surrounded them and placed them in handcuffs.

· Independent video journalist Brendan Gutenschwager said he was "brutalized by police" when he was arrested while covering protests in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin against the refusal to bring charges against the officer who murdered 17-year-old Alvin Cole. Gutenschwager described being threatened with a Taser, dragged on the ground and zip-tied, then thrown into a paddy wagon with a mix of protesters and other journalists.

· Samuel Robinson, a reporter for MLive, was arrested with counter-protesters at a Proud Boys rally in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Robinson reported the Proud Boys violently attacked a homeless resident and counter-protesters. Police arrived at the scene and began arresting demonstrators. In the video of the arrest, Robinson clearly stated he was with the media while being pushed to the ground by police in riot gear. The fascist Proud Boys were allowed to leave the scene with the help of police.

In 2020 alone, the organization recorded 392 assaults on journalists, 99 incidents of equipment damage, and almost 1000 violations of press freedom related to "national social justice protests." Despite the fact that 36 percent of the arrests were accompanied by a physical attack by the police, no officer has been charged with assault. Meanwhile, 13 journalists currently face criminal charges.

The increase in the number of attacks on journalists was, and remains, bound up with the decline of American democracy and the trend toward dictatorship. Last year's spontaneous movement of millions of workers against the police terrified the ruling class. Both Republican and Democratic politicians moved quickly to brutally repress the protests through violent police crackdowns and the deployment of the National Guard, terrified that the protests would expand further. The crackdowns were accompanied by a campaign to silence journalists in an effort to cover up the acts of brutality committed by police.

The ruling class is engaged in an active campaign of intimidation and censorship. Journalist Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, remains imprisoned in London's Belmarsh Prison as the Biden administration continues to seek his extradition to face charges for exposing American war crimes. The *World Socialist Web Site* is actively being censored by technology corporations like Google and Facebook. The defense of democratic rights requires the mobilization and intervention of the working class fighting for the socialist reorganization of society.

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