Murder trial begins for former officer charged in the death of George Floyd

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The criminal trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin opened Monday, 10 months after George Floyd's death ignited an eruption of mass multi-racial demonstrations that spread to every continent. Deliberations are expected to continue for three to four weeks.

Last May 25, Chauvin pressed his knee to Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes as Floyd was handcuffed and held to the ground by two other officers. Chauvin is charged with second-degree murder, second-degree manslaughter and third-degree murder. If convicted of the most serious charge, he could face 10.5 to 15 years in prison.

Attorney Jerry Blackwell began the trial with the opening statement for the prosecution. Speaking for about an hour, Blackwell presented Chauvin's actions as a deviation from standard police policies and procedures that govern the Minneapolis Police Department. He told jurors the case "is not about all police" or the difficult "split-second decisions police must make," but rather the "569-second" period when Chauvin did not "get up" or "let up."

"You will learn that on May 25 of 2020, Mr. Derek Chauvin betrayed his badge when he used excessive and unreasonable force upon the body of Mr. George Floyd," Blackwell told jurors. "He put his knees upon his neck and his back, grinding, and crushing him until the very breath… until the very life was squeezed out of him."

Blackwell played the bystander video of the incident and presented jurors with a visual timeline, noting Floyd could be heard saying "I can't breathe" 27 times, and Chauvin did not get up even after Floyd did not have a pulse. Blackwell stated Chauvin's excessive use of force caused Floyd's death, pointing out Floyd experienced an anoxic seizure and agonal breathing because of oxygen deprivation.

Lead defense attorney Eric Nelson focused the defense's opening statement on Floyd's alleged drug use and his altercation with officers during his arrest. Nelson argued the evidence in the case was "far greater than 9 minutes and 29 seconds." He said it was not Chauvin's knee but a combination of drug use and preexisting health conditions that caused Floyd's death.

"What was Mr. Floyd's actual cause of death? The evidence will show that Mr. Floyd died of a cardiac arrhythmia that occurred as a result of hypertension, coronary disease, the ingestion of methamphetamine and fentanyl, and the adrenaline flowing through his body—all of which acted to further compromise an already compromised heart," Nelson said.

Nelson indicated the jury would be shown footage captured where Floyd allegedly resisted arrest. He said the arrest was complicated by the fact that Chauvin is only 5-foot-9 and approximately 140 pounds, compared to Floyd, who was over six feet tall and 220 pounds. Nelson argued that the gathering crowd that witnessed Floyd's death was threatening to officers, causing them to shift their attention away from Floyd's well-being.

Nelson presented Chauvin and other officers as distressed and merely acting as they were trained. He said Chauvin "did exactly what he had been trained to do over the course of his 19-year career."

The first witness the prosecution called was Jena Lee Scurry, a 911 dispatcher who notified a supervisor when she saw police using excessive force against Floyd. Scurry said she saw live feed of the incident from city surveillance videos. She said she remembered seeing Floyd in the police car before later seeing Floyd on the ground, and she initially thought the video feed had malfunctioned because no one appeared to move for some time.

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"I first asked if the screens had frozen because it hadn't changed," Scurry said, adding, "I became concerned that something might be wrong… it was a gut instinct of, in the incident, something's not going right."

The prosecution played a recording of the call Scurry made to a police sergeant, where she can be heard saying, "You can call me a snitch if you want to… I don't know if they have used force or not. They got something out of the squad [car] and all of them sat on this man."

While cross-examining Scurry, the defense focused on the fact that Scurry does not have the same training as a police officer, suggesting she was not qualified to determine if the officers' actions were in line with their training.

The second witness to take the stand, Alisha Oyler, said she saw police "messing with someone" while she was working at the Speedway gas station near the incident. Oyler recorded footage of the assault from across the street, saying she was recording because the police were always "messing with people," and said, "it's wrong, it's not right."

Donald Wynn Williams, the third witness, was one of the bystanders who yelled at police to get off of Floyd's neck. Williams, who has mixed martial arts training, described how Chauvin used a "blood choke" against Floyd. Blood chokes are a form of strangulation that disrupt blood flow to the brain.

"You can see his foot, his toe is pointing down," Williams said. "And that's the pressure, to push more down, between his knee, George's head and the concrete and cut off circulation."

Williams said the only time Chauvin looked at him was when he called out that the officer was doing a blood choke.

"We looked each other dead in the eyes, when I said it, he acknowledged it," Williams said.

After technical difficulties disrupted the live stream of the trial, Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill ended the day's session early. The trial is set to resume Tuesday around 9:30 a.m., with further testimony from Williams.

Chauvin's trial is extraordinary in many ways. State officials have bent over backwards to ensure Chauvin received a "fair" trial. The jurors in the case were meticulously selected, having to answer a 16-page questionnaire before being questioned by both parties in the trial. Judge Cahill allowed the defense to object to up to 15 jurors without reason, while the prosecution could reject up to nine.

Understanding millions of workers, outraged by police brutality, will pay close attention to the trial, Cahill made the decision to open the trial up for livestream. Meanwhile, there is extreme nervousness about social tensions in the city, with officials completely blocking the Minneapolis government center from the public and deploying the National Guard.

Incidents of police brutality, torture and murder are pervasive in the US. However, police are reluctantly prosecuted and only rarely by the state. Generally speaking, prosecutions are initiated only when the incident is caught on video, provoking a massive public response.

The Minneapolis Police Department issued a public statement May 26 that said nothing about Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck: "After Floyd got out [of his car], he physically resisted officers. Officers were able to get the suspect into handcuffs and noted he appeared to be suffering medical distress."

If bystanders had not captured the incident on their cellphones, that would have been the official story, just like hundreds of other incidents every year.

The American justice system routinely hands out brutal sentences to workers for the pettiest of crimes. It is easy to imagine the response of the state and media had Floyd or another worker been recorded kneeling on the neck of a police officer.

The media and the pseudo-left have taken great pains to promote a racial narrative in the case. However, the prevalence of police killings in the US is a consequence of the class war offensive waged by the ruling elite against the entire working class. Rather than simply being an issue of racist cops against minorities, the conflict is between the armed representatives of the capitalist state and the working class.

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