

Prosecutors and media smear 13-year-old killed by Chicago police

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Anticipating mass protests over the summary execution of 13-year-old Adam Toledo by Chicago police on March 29, prosecutors from the Cook County State's Attorney's Office, city officials and local media are seeking to portray the boy as a hardened gang member, justifying the police murder. Despite these attempts to shift blame away from the Chicago Police Department (CPD), Toledo's death has shed further light on the lawlessness and brutality that characterize police operations in working class neighborhoods.

The city and police department have continued to stonewall, refusing to release police body camera footage of the killing to the public. In keeping the video under wraps, the misnamed Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA) first cited the Illinois Juvenile Court Act, claiming Toledo's right to privacy as a minor prevented the city from releasing the video. However, in response to public outrage over the killing and experts who made clear the absurdity of COPA's legal claim, COPA agreed to release the footage to the public. But they have insisted Toledo's family have a chance to view it first, a viewing which will reportedly happen sometime this week. Toledo was shot in the early morning hours of March 29 and his family was not notified of his death for two days.

In the meantime, police and prosecutors have continued to selectively release information about the shooting in an effort to label it as justified and place the blame for Toledo's death on the family, on gangs and on gun violence, rather than on the police. The need for this effort comes from the likely horrific nature of the body camera footage. On Saturday, while denying she had seen the footage, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot warned the video "will only help disabuse a lot of urban myth that has sprung up in the void. But I want to

be clear: From what's been described to me, it is going to be a very tough video for people to watch."

The most detailed depictions of the shooting so far have come from prosecutors from the Cook County State's Attorney's Office, which brought new felony charges against 21-year-old Ruben Roman for his alleged role in the events which led to Toledo's death. Initially, Roman had been charged only with a misdemeanor for resisting arrest, but prosecutors are now seeking charges against him for felony reckless discharge of a firearm, unlawful use of a weapon and child endangerment.

According to prosecutors, Toledo and Roman were walking together around 2:30 a.m. in the Southwest Side neighborhood of Little Village. A security camera at a nearby church supposedly shows Roman at one point firing a gun several times at a passing car, with Toledo standing close to him. After the gunshots were detected by a ShotSpotter system installed in the area, Chicago police officers arrived at the scene within minutes and began to give chase to Roman and Toledo. In the ensuing chase, Roman was quickly tackled by one of the police officers while Toledo was pursued by the other officer to a nearby alley and shot in the chest. The gun allegedly found near Toledo is said by prosecutors to match the shell casings found near where Roman fired the earlier shots.

Since police responded within minutes primarily to the alert of gunfire, it is clear that police, far from carrying out any investigation to find out which crimes, if any, had occurred, moved immediately to pursue and violently confront Roman and Toledo. Fundamentally violating the right to due process, the police executed Toledo, thus the need to depict him as a hardened criminal posing a danger to the public and the police.

An opening salvo in the city's filthy propaganda

effort came from *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn, a self-identified Democrat. In a piece titled “Let’s wait before turning slain 13-year-old Adam Toledo into a martyr,” Zorn suggested people should “stop romanticizing and infantilizing 13-year-olds.”

Accepting the city and police department’s earliest descriptions of the killing of Toledo as an “armed confrontation,” Zorn acknowledges the need to press for further information and suggests “a thorough review may find that police shot in justifiable self-defense.”

A number of commenters responded to Zorn’s column, objecting to its supposed expression of racism. Princeton professor and former leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote on Twitter, “The things they will never say about white children. This pulled from the column of the most read paper in Chicago is what is meant by ‘systemic racism.’”

The pseudo-left *Left Voice* tweeted on similar lines, saying, “The *Chicago Tribune* is encouraging cops to kill 13 year olds. After all, as they put it ‘It’s never too early to stop pretending that 13-year-olds are inherently harmless.’ And by 13 year olds, they don’t mean white kids. They mean Black and Brown middle schoolers.”

The reality is that Zorn’s column does not represent an expression of racism, but rather the class basis of the Democratic Party, the same party which in the mid-1990s raised the bogeyman of “super-predators” to justify the violent police occupation of working class neighborhoods while factories were being closed and social services dismantled.

Contrary to the claims of the peddlers of identity politics, police violence, even against children, is not meted out solely on the basis of race. In just one recent example, last September police in Salt Lake City shot 13-year-old Linden Cameron, who is white and has autism, as he ran away from them.

While there is no doubt a great deal of racism among Chicago police officers, the fundamental issue in the death of Adam Toledo is the role of the police in enforcing social inequality. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote last summer in response to the protests following the police murder of George Floyd:

The inevitable by-product of social inequality

is the breakdown of democratic forms of rule. The massive concentration of wealth creates social tensions that cannot be reconciled through traditional democratic channels. The violence employed by the capitalist state against the working class—and, especially, its poorest and most vulnerable sections—assumes an ever more brutal form. The homicidal practices of the police are only the most naked expression of class violence. The public strangulation of George Floyd, for all its horror, was just one of one thousand killings carried out by police on the streets of the United States every year.



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