

Pittsburgh protester who lost eye from police projectile harassed by officer at court hearing

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7 May 2021

Nearly a year ago on May 30, 2020, Alex Horell lost his right eye after a projectile fired by police struck him in the head during a Black Lives Matter protest in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Horell believes that he was likely shot by a rubber bullet, telling the *Pittsburgh City Paper*, “I really distinctly remember being hit, that is what I really remember. Then I remember people shouting ‘Man down!’ and not realizing that it was about me. I remember people looking at my face coming to, like they were looking at a dead person. That is a pretty vivid memory.”

“The doctors did say it was the equivalent of a baseball bat to the face. It’s a really dark irony that a police brutality protest is met with more brutality, and it doesn’t seem to matter.”

“Just getting around is weird. I trip and bump into things, balance is different. I’ll never play sports again.”

According to *Pittsburgh City Paper*, Horell’s attorney possesses video footage showing the shooting. The footage shows a tear gas canister rolling towards the police line. Two officers from the front then move forward pointing towards the crowd, directing a third officer to aim and fire what appears to be a kinetic impact projectile firearm into the crowd at a specific person or group and striking Horell in the face.

Pittsburgh police policy prohibits the aiming of less-lethal projectiles at the head or neck unless deadly force is justified.

May 30 was Pittsburgh’s first and largest protest of the several held in response to the police murder of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Police responded to the protest in Pittsburgh and at others across the country with extreme shows of force, often deploying violent tactics that resulted in multiple

injuries. Physicians for Human Rights found at least 115 head injuries last summer caused by police use of kinetic impact projectiles, a class of crowd control weapons that includes rubber bullets and bean bags.

One month after he was grievously injured, Horell’s lawyer, Fred Rabner, issued a letter to the Pittsburgh Police Department about a possible lawsuit. Following the letter Horell was charged on August 6, 2020, with felony riot, misdemeanor obstruction of law enforcement, misdemeanor obstruction of public passages, misdemeanor failure to disperse, summary disorderly conduct and summary scattering of rubbish.

No evidence has been provided to support the claims of the accusing officer, Sean Stumpf, who claims that he was reviewing footage of the protests and saw Horell take “an active role in the riot” by removing a public trash can and collecting tear gas canisters to throw back at police.

The designation of the protest as a “riot” is also pernicious given that only limited instances of property damage were reported that night, and that news reports from May 30 show that the police began firing tear gas and flash grenades at protesters 20 minutes before any reports of broken windows or looting.

Prosecutors have promised to present the video evidence to the defense but have not yet done so. Preliminary hearings have been rescheduled multiple times and Rabner’s April 5 request to view the footage was conveniently interrupted by a software malfunction that prevented the video from playing.

All indications point towards an intentionally fraudulent criminal prosecution designed to harass and intimidate a victim of police brutality.

This was demonstrated during the April 5 hearing when Horell was detained by his accusing officer without charge. Horell had reportedly taken out his

phone during the hearing to text his roommate, which is against court rules. Horell was swiftly confronted by Stumpf, who accused him of illegally taking photos of the courtroom, an accusation that proved to be false.

He was removed from the courtroom while his lawyer was not present and told that he did not have the right to an attorney. While use of a cell phone inside of a Pittsburgh court is prohibited, according to Olyvia Adkins, a volunteer court watcher for the Abolitionist Law Center, defendants are typically asked three to four times not to use their phones before any more serious action is taken.

According to official court documents the presiding judge was not even informed of the detention of Horell. “Unbeknownst to the court, without any prior notice to the court, the defendant in this case was taken into custody in the courtroom by [Allegheny County Sheriff’s Deputy Bobeck] and other deputy sheriffs,” said Judge Pappas on April 5. “It wasn’t clear to me why it happened, when it did, or what was going on. And I was taken aback by this, as were others in the courtroom. I am not sure if there was a warrant or an immediate public safety risk was present. I am not sure what occurred or didn’t.”

The intention of the officers involved was clearly to intimidate Horell and punish him for even considering speaking out against the brutality to which he was subjected. It is also clear that the officers involved trampled legal procedure and democratic rights, taking it upon themselves to carry out extrajudicial shakedowns like a gang of mobsters.

“Alex doesn’t fit the bill of someone who was acting unruly,” said Rabner. “He fits the bill of someone who lost his eye. So the best defense here is a citywide offense and that’s why he’s charged.”

From the charges against Horell to his treatment in court, it is clear that the police intend to snuff out any resistance to police brutality through whatever means they can apply. It was the initial protests against police violence which brought the excessive actions of the police that took Horell’s eye. Now it is the threat that Horell’s injury and his potential lawsuit against the police department will expose the brutality inherent to the police system.

Rabner’s words also speak to the broader social crisis driving police brutality across the United States. The police are carrying out an offensive against the working

class and its democratic rights. The severe injury of Horell and the blatant attempts to intimidate him are signs of a police apparatus that is becoming increasingly militarized and emboldened to deploy unjustified violence against the working class in defense of immense levels of social inequality.



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