

Three Pennsylvania police officers charged in killing of 8-year-old girl

Samuel Davidson
20 January 2022

Prosecutors in Pennsylvania have filed manslaughter charges against three police officers who shot and killed 8-year-old Fanta Bility last summer as she and her family exited a high school football game in Sharon Hill, a suburb of Philadelphia, last August. Her older sister and two others were also shot and wounded, but not killed.

The three officers, Devon Smith, Sean Dolan and Brian Devaney, were each charged with one count of voluntary manslaughter, one count of involuntary manslaughter and 10 counts of reckless endangerment.

Bail was set as an unsecured \$500,000 bond. The officers were immediately released without having to pay any bail.

Investigators recovered 25 9mm cartridge casings at the scene and ballistic tests showed that they all came from the officers' guns as did the bullet which killed Fanta.

According to witnesses, two teenagers, Angelo "AJ" Ford and Hasein Strand, were among hundreds of students and families attending the football game on August 27, 2021. According to most accounts, Ford and Strands had been exchanging words during the game and afterwards, more than a block from the stadium, got into a fight in which they fired their guns.

The three officers, without knowing where the shots were coming from, opened fire on a car being driven by two girls who were also leaving the football game. Neither the two girls driving the car, 8-year-old Fanta Bility, her older sister or the others who were also shot were involved in the fight between Ford and Strand.

The charges were filed after a grand jury investigation returned its findings. Testimony before the grand jury is not made public. The Delaware County District Attorney's office chose the lesser charge of manslaughter rather than murder in the third degree, claiming that there was no evidence of malice.

At the same time, the District Attorney suspended murder in the first degree charges against the two

teenagers, Ford and Strand. Those charges were filed this past November.

Anger erupted in Sharon Hill and throughout the Philadelphia region after prosecutors charged the two youths and not the police, even though the teenagers did not fire the bullet that killed Fanta Bility.

Justifying the first-degree murder charges against the youth, Delaware County District Attorney Jack Stollsteimer said at the time that the teenagers were ultimately responsible for the police murder of Bility.

"Under the laws of this Commonwealth, my office has determined that Ford and Strand should both be held criminally liable for the murder of Fanta Bility, as well as for the wounding of all of the bystanders," Stollsteimer said in November.

Making clear that the prosecutor still believes that the youths, not the police, are responsible, Stollsteimer said that the charges are being suspended, not dropped, and may be refiled after the police are tried.

Speaking of the teenagers and not the police, Stollsteimer said in a release, "while I believe these defendants should be held accountable for starting the series of events that ultimately led to Fanta Bility's death, developments during the grand jury investigation render it appropriate to withdraw these charges at this time."

The District Attorney's office is shielding the police and providing them with a ready made defense—that the two youths started the chain of events that led to Fanta Bility's death and that they should be held responsible, not only for their actions, but for the actions of the police as well.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

In Pittsburgh, no charges have been filed against the police who killed a 54-year-old homeless man on October 13, 2021. Jim Rogers was brutalized and tased while being arrested, kicked and rolled along the street, denied medical care and thrown into the back of a police car. He died the following day.

Seven of the eight officers involved in the arrest are still working for the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, while one officer was allowed to retire. Pittsburgh city government says that the officers are being disciplined, but has refused to say what this discipline is. Nor has the city released the names of the officers or the full body camera video of Rogers' arrest and treatment by the police.

Neighbors who witnessed the murder stated that Rogers was non-confrontational with police who kept shouting louder and louder at him. They also said that it was clear that he was homeless and had mental health issues.

Cell phone video taken of the arrest shows Rogers sitting trying to talk with police when he was violently handcuffed and tased several times. Rogers can be seen being kicked along and rolled along the street and violently thrown into the back of the police car.

City paramedics were called to the scene but did not treat Rogers, rather they assisted police who had gotten some of Rogers' blood on them.

Despite evidence that police discharged their tasers eight times, kicked Rogers and denied him medical care he requested, the Allegheny County medical examiner has ruled Rogers' death an accident, lessening the chances that the officers involved will be charged.

"He was just sitting there," said one neighbor who asked not to be identified. "The cop would yell at him and he just said very calmly, "but I didn't do anything."

Since taking office, Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey has not made any public statement in regards to Rogers' death and has defended the police saying that the investigation has to be allowed to continue. This is standard fare for politicians hoping they can drag things out and the public will forget his murder.

Gainey is Pittsburgh's first black mayor. A former city council member and state representative, Gainey won the Democratic Party primary this past spring against incumbent William Puduto. Gainey won largely due to Puduto's support for the police during the protests over the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the rapid rise in housing prices which are pushing low income and working class African American households out of the neighborhoods they lived in.

The massive protests that erupted in 2020 over the

killing of George Floyd and others were among the largest protests in United States history. They were also the most multiracial protests and expanded throughout the world. They reflected the broad hatred within the population for the treatment meted out to minorities, the working class and the poor by the police.

However, the protests were largely diverted by the Black Lives Matters movement and pseudo-left organizations into identity politics and support for Democrats in the 2020 elections, including the election of Biden as president. They claimed that police violence could be ended with the election of Democrats who would in turn carry out reforming of policing and police departments.

The reality has been just the opposite. Upon taking office, Biden made clear his continued support for the police and continues to pump tens of millions of dollars in federal funding into police departments throughout the country. Local Democratic mayors such as Lori Lightfoot of Chicago have dropped their promises of reform.

Throughout the country, police killings continue at their previous level. According to Mapping Police Violence there were 1,136 people killed by police in 2021, higher than 2020 when 1,126 people were killed by police. Both are most likely undercounts since the data is not official reporting but collected from news accounts that appear in the press.

The federal agency charged with keeping records of the death of people while in police custody stopped collecting data in 2019 under the Trump administration and the Biden administration has not restored it.

In only a handful of very high profile cases, such as the murder of George Floyd, are police officers tried and convicted. In the vast majority of the cases, no arrests, let alone trial and conviction, ever take place.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact