

Protests mount over Grand Rapids police murder of Patrick Lyoya

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Hundreds of people marched on the headquarters of the Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD) Thursday evening to protest the execution-style murder of Patrick Lyoya, a 26-year-old Congolese refugee, by a Grand Rapids cop. It was the third consecutive day of protest in the city, the largest in western Michigan.

Popular anger and outrage were intensified nationwide by the release by the GRPD of video footage related to the April 4 killing of Lyoya, who was unarmed. Of the four sources of video—the officer’s body camera, a police car dashcam, a home surveillance system and the smartphone of the passenger in Lyoya’s car—the smartphone video shows the moment that the young man was fatally shot by the policeman. Lyoya was lying face down on the ground with the cop kneeling on his back.

In the hours before the video was released, the GRPD headquarters in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan was fortified with barricades.

The GRPD has refused to release the name of the police officer pending an investigation by the Michigan State Police, which is routinely called in to probe officer-involved shootings in the state. The MSP will make a recommendation to the local prosecutor—or an outside prosecutor if one is sought by the city—on whether the shooting is justified or unjustified, and whether the police action warrants prosecution.

Lyoya was killed by the police officer after he was pulled over for a license plate violation at approximately 8:00 a.m. on April 4. In the dashcam and bodycam footage, the audio of the traffic stop is redacted.

The footage shows the officer talking to Lyoya, who gets out of his car and appears confused when he is asked for his driver’s license. When the young man asks the officer, “For what?,” the policemen mockingly asks, “Do you speak English?” When Lyoya closes the car door and turns to start walking away, the officer says, “No, no, no, stop, stop,” and puts his hands on the driver’s shoulder

and back.

Lyoya then backs away and starts running and the officer tackles him. The body camera recorded the physical confrontation during which the officer pulled out his taser, and Lyoya grabbed it and pulled it down and away from himself. The officer says, “Let go of the taser,” and then the body camera stopped filming at 8:14. According to GRPD Chief Eric Winstrom, this requires that a button be pressed for three seconds, but he claimed this may have happened by accident during the struggle.

The body camera resumed filming again at 8:22. The footage shows several officers taking turns performing chest compressions, though Lyoya himself is not visible. The audio from the first twenty-eight seconds of this video is also redacted.

The footage captured by the passenger in Lyoya’s car shows most of the physical altercation between the officer and Lyoya and moment the officer let go of his taser and pulled out his handgun, and yelled, “Drop the taser!” He then shoved Lyoya hard into the dirt, pressed his gun firmly on the back of his head, and pulled the trigger. The officer got off Lyoya and walked away, saying into his radio, “I was just involved in a shooting.”

When more officers arrived, they first arrested Lyoya’s passenger, who has not been identified. This was a drawn-out process in which they treated him as a potential threat and had him put his hands up and slowly back up toward them. It remains unclear if the passenger has been charged with a crime.

The videos then show the officers slowly approaching the car with their guns drawn, and they spent around forty seconds staring into the vehicle. An officer then says into his radio, “The car is clear, we’ll be moving up to, uh... render aid.” However, the officers hurry off in the opposite direction, and it is a full minute before they report that they are performing CPR.

Lyoya’s family appeared at a press conference to voice

their demands for prosecution of the policeman who killed their eldest son. His mother Dorcas appealed, through an interpreter, “I need justice for my son.” She added, “I thought my son would bury me. What is astonishing is I bury my son.”

Benjamin Crump, the well-known civil rights lawyer who now represents the family, said the videos were proof the killing was itself a crime. “You see a police officer escalate a minor traffic stop into a deadly execution,” he said.

The press conference was also attended by Tamika Palmer, mother of Breonna Taylor, the young medical technician murdered by Louisville police in 2020 during a no-knock raid on her apartment.

After the press conference, Robert Womack, a Kent County commissioner who worked with the Lyoya family after the shooting, told reporters, “...the knee does go on the back, the gun goes to the back of the head, he pulls the trigger. And I believe that America is going to say, ‘There’s a lot of other things that could have happened.’”

Crump told the press, “It should be noted that Patrick never used violence against this officer, even though the officer used violence against him in several instances for what was a misdemeanor traffic stop.” He added, “The video clearly shows that this was an unnecessary, excessive, and fatal use of force against an unarmed black man who was confused by the encounter and terrified for his life.”

The videos were released after a press conference given by Chief Winstrom, during which he was asked by reporters if he would release the name of the officer who killed Lyoya. He responded, “I’m going to treat the officer like I would anybody else, we don’t name suspects. If the officer is charged with a crime, we will name him at that time, but the short answer is, no, I’m not going to be naming the officer.”

When asked to comment on whether the shooting was in compliance with GRPD use-of-force policy, Winstrom told reporters that he would not say anything until the Michigan State Police have finished their investigation. He went on to explain why the footage was being released, saying, “Just to be clear, again, the reason that we’re having this today is—this is transparency about the use-of-force incident. I want to be as transparent as possible.”

The killing of Lyoya came three days after another incident of police violence. Video of an April 1 GRPD traffic stop went viral, which showed a man driving to a

vacant lot and going into his house. The police drew their guns on the man and his pregnant wife when they emerged from their home to talk to the officers.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued a statement of condolence to the Lyoya family while promising a full investigation. Her main concern was to tamp down any protests over yet another police killing in broad daylight. “Patrick’s father asked me to convey his hope that any demonstrations in his son’s honor remain peaceful, and as Governor I share this view,” she said.

The Republican candidates opposing Whitmer in the November election blasted her pose of sympathy for the family as “anti-police.” The current frontrunner, former Detroit police chief James Craig, said, “When an officer is faced with an imminent threat to his life or another person, deadly force may be the only option.”

Republican Garrett Soldano essentially blamed the victim for running away and then struggling over the taser. “If you do not resist, it is very, very, very rare that you are going to get shot by a police officer, if you do exactly what they tell you to do,” he claimed.

The most unhinged statement came from former right-wing media pundit Tudor Dixon, who was introduced by Trump at his recent Michigan rally, although he did not explicitly endorse her campaign. She denounced Whitmer and the Democrats, saying they “have predictably taken the side of the criminal... Far more shamefully, though, even my Republican opponents are cowering in fear, issuing mealy-mouthed ‘let’s wait and see’ statements and hoping this all blows over.”

“If you want to commit crimes and jeopardize the lives of our men and women in blue, you can head on down to Chicago or wherever doesn’t care if you hurt or kill people,” Dixon continued. “We will not let this officer—or any officer—be sandbagged for reasonably protecting themselves by weak politicians who are afraid to say and do what is right.”

This statement underscores the continued shift to the right by the Republican Party, and its open defense of fascistic violence directed against the working class.



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