

Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva threatens reporter for exposing cover-up of deputy violence

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At a bizarre press conference Tuesday, Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva announced he was opening a criminal investigation into *Los Angeles Times* reporter Alene Tchekmedyan for her articles accusing him of personal involvement in the cover-up of a surveillance video that shows a deputy kneeling for three minutes on the head of a handcuffed inmate, an image eerily reminiscent of the George Floyd murder.

Villanueva displayed a photo collage linking the supposed “theft” of the video to Max Huntsman, the inspector general who reports to the County Board of Supervisors, and Sheriff’s Commander Eli Vera, one of six candidates running to replace Villanueva, who faces a primary election on June 7 and, if necessary, a runoff in November.

The Sheriff listed various felonies, including conspiracy, burglary and unauthorized use of a database, adding that “these three people have some important questions to answer.”

Tchekmedyan is not the first reporter targeted by Villanueva. In September 2020, Josie Huang, a reporter for a local National Public Radio station, was attacked by multiple deputies, pinned to the asphalt, handcuffed and arrested in a parking lot outside a Villanueva news conference. The charges against her were dismissed.

The *Los Angeles Times* has been the voice of the Southern California capitalist ruling elite since the turn of the 19th century, particularly infamous for publisher Harry Chandler’s vicious campaigns against socialist candidates, unionization and left-wing lawyer Clarence Darrow. But Villanueva’s latest attack is a bridge too far. The *Times*’ executive editor Kevin Merida protested that Villanueva’s “attempt to criminalize news reporting goes against well-established constitutional law,” pledging, “We will vigorously defend Tchekmedyan’s and the *Los*

Angeles Times’ rights in any proceeding or investigation brought by authorities.”

The *Times* has not been “vigorous,” however, when it comes to defending Julian Assange’s rights to report on the crimes of United States imperialism. Like the so-called mainstream media as a whole, aside from sporadic and perfunctory news articles the paper has been silent regarding the extradition of Assange to the United States to face bogus Espionage Act charges that threaten life imprisonment.

Villanueva was unexpectedly elected Sheriff in 2018, defeating the incumbent by cynically using his Latin-American ancestry to pose as a reform-minded Democrat who would protect the rights of immigrants caught up in the massive Los Angeles County jail system, deliberately riding the wave of massive anti-Trump sentiment in Southern California.

The current scandal began last month after the *Times* ran a story about an incident in a holding area outside a courtroom in the San Fernando Valley. An inmate punched a deputy, Douglas Johnson, during a routine search. The surveillance video shows Johnson’s knee pinning the inmate’s head to the floor for three minutes after handcuffing. The inmate sustained only minor injuries.

The incident took place on March 10, 2021, two days after jury selection began in the murder trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Deputy Johnson was already under investigation for photographing the remains of National Basketball Association superstar Kobe Bryant and others who died in the January 26, 2020, helicopter accident, and sharing the photographs with other deputies.

According to a Sheriff’s Department memorandum, “It was determined the case should not be filed [against the

inmate] given the misconduct/unreasonable force allegation and the potential for this incident to shed negative light on the Department given its nature and its similarities to widely publicized George Floyd use of force.”

On April 7, the *Times* reported that Huntsman had subpoenaed Villanueva based on reports that the Sheriff lied about when he learned of the San Fernando incident. Monday the *Times* published a follow-up report that Villanueva personally viewed the video with high-level aides five days after it occurred, telling them, “We do not need bad media at this time,” and he would “handle the matter.”

Villanueva’s hostility to the fundamental democratic right to report apparent governmental misconduct is intimately connected with the authoritarian, right-wing politics of US law enforcement generally.

Last Saturday Villanueva appeared with San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus and Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco for a so-called “Tri-County Sheriff’s Forum.” The three contiguous Southern California counties are home to about 16 million, that is, one out of 20 people living in the United States.

Bianco is the highest-level law-enforcement official known to have joined the overtly fascistic “Oath Keepers.” In the presence of the other two sheriffs, he stated the government will “never fix” homelessness “because it has nothing to do with homes or lack of homes. It’s a drug induced psychosis.”

Rather than distancing himself from these repugnant remarks, Villanueva piled on, suggesting that the unhoused be put on trains with “one-way tickets to wherever they came from,” adding, “I don’t need them here in L.A. What we’re missing is political will. We have the answers.”

These fascistic rants that echo the rhetoric of Hitler’s final solution while conjuring images of trains to Auschwitz and other death camps are the product of a diseased and dysfunctional capitalist social order that has reached the end of its rope.



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