Charges filed against Philadelphia police officer for execution-style killing of unarmed 12-year-old

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Former Philadelphia police officer Edsaul Mendoza has been charged with first degree murder in the shooting death of 12-year-old Thomas Siderio Jr. Mendoza shot Siderio in the back on March 1, killing the boy where he lay.

Philadelphia's Democratic District Attorney, Larry Krasner, announced the charges at a press conference on Monday. In his remarks, Krasner made clear that the grand jury decided to press charges on the basis of a video showing the brutal murder. This video has yet to be publicly released, however the presentment issued by the grand jury details the video evidence shown to them.

It states that the four police officers involved were driving in an unmarked car and circled the block before deciding to pull over Siderio and his 17-year-old companion, referred to as NK in the presentment. The police did not turn on the vehicles lights until roughly the moment when a shot is fired into their vehicle and they exit it wearing plain clothes. In all likelihood Siderio and NK, living in a neighborhood wracked by violence, thought they were about to be mugged.

The presentment then details that Mendoza chased Siderio down most of a city block before shooting him in the back from 10 feet away while he lay prone. It shows that Mendoza approached Siderio incautiously, suggesting he did not believe the 12-year-old, 5-foot-tall child to be armed or a threat to himself. After shooting, Mendoza indicated to a fellow officer that Siderio had dropped his gun midway down the block, almost 40 feet behind where he was killed.

In his statements to the press Krasner was at pains to emphasize how egregious the act was and how there was essentially no room for doubt that Mendoza murdered Siderio, having no reason to fear for his or another's life.

He emphasized that, in most police shootings, an argument can be made that the police officer genuinely feared for their life before shooting a civilian. Mendoza's conduct, Krasner explained, was "completely inconsistent with Mendoza believing Siderio was armed." The murder was conducted execution-style, while the boy "was essentially facedown on the sidewalk."

The argument that an officer was fearful for their life at the moment of shooting is commonly used to exonerate them after killing someone. Investigators will often enumerate the chain of escalations and poor decisions that led a police officer to kill, but conclude that, nonetheless, the officer was justified in fearing for their life during the split second that they opened fire.

A day after the shooting, Deputy Commissioner Benjamin Naish, told reporters that the fact that Siderio was fleeing "doesn't mean that he wasn't continuing to be a threat to the officers," laying the groundwork for an eventual ruling that Mendoza was justified. No doubt it is the presence of damning video evidence that forced authorities to press for charges against Mendoza.

Krasner was enthusiastically supported by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America and Socialist Alternative when he initially ran for DA in 2017. However he soon showed his subservience to the class interests that rule Philadelphia. When internationally known political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal was granted a new opportunity to appeal his conviction by Justice Leon Tucker, Krasner appealed this decision in order to block Abu-Jamal from re-arguing his case.

There can be no doubt that Philadelphia authorities

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are concerned about an explosion of protests if the video showing Siderio being executed by Mendoza is publicly released, and are doing what they can to stay in front of the situation. The charges against Mendoza follow mass protests in Grand Rapids, Michigan against another execution-style police murder against an unarmed person.

The victim, Patrick Lyoya, was a refugee and auto parts worker who had fled to the US with his family from violence in the Congo in 2014. He was stopped for allegedly driving with unregistered plates, and after a brief scuffle with officer Christopher Schurr, Lyoya was shot in the back of the head. While the whole incident was caught on multiple videos, leaving no ambiguity as to the brutality of the officer's actions, the prosecutor has so far refused to charge Schurr with any crime.

Philadelphians took to the street after the murder of George Floyd sparked global outrage at police violence in 2020 and again when Philadelphia police shot Walter Wallace to death while he was having a mental health crisis later that same year.

Far from Krasner's claim that the murder of Siderio is an exceptional case, different from most police shootings, the reality is that police regularly terrorize working class neighborhoods across the city and the country.

The police unit that Mendoza was part of, the South Task Force, is notorious for its aggressive actions that routinely put people in danger. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the task force routinely harasses residents. "Task force members … wearing jeans and hoodies and driving unmarked cars," the report states, "had gained a reputation as 'cowboys' or 'jump-out boys,' creating unsafe or chaotic situations in pursuit of arrests."

Their unmarked black Chevrolet Cruze is a fixture in many poor neighborhoods where it has chased drivers without using lights or a siren, leading in at least one case to a traffic accident. "Anyone you meet from South Philly, you can ask about that black Chevy Cruze. Everyone will say 'Yeah, I know them. They're crazy,'" a Philadelphia resident told the *Inquirer*.

It is reasonable to believe that Siderio would have heard stories or witnessed these events first hand, leading him to fear for his safety when he saw the unmarked black car come around the block a second time and pull up next to him and his friend.

The actions of the South Task Force bear striking resemblance to the now defunct Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF) in nearby Baltimore, Maryland. Like the Philadelphia task force, the GTTF was set up ostensibly to crack down on illegal gun possession. However, the members of the task force acted as virtual gangsters and in 2018, six of the nine officers involved pleaded guilty to racketeering.

The Democrats, when not outright promoting the police as upholders of "law and order," claim that police violence is to be explained as the product of white racism against blacks. However, the killing of Siderio, an unarmed white youth, demonstrates that police violence is primarily directed at the working class and poor of all races.

The reality is that the police function to protect capitalist property rights and repress social unrest, something the Democrats view as essential. The growing social crisis—exacerbated by the pandemic and the ruling class drive to war—has hit Philadelphia as hard as any city. One quarter of the city lives in poverty, as do nearly one-third of its children.

The only way to end police violence is through united action by the international working class against the capitalist system and the reorganization of society to eliminate private property and with it poverty and social inequality.

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