

As MPD permanently deactivates SCORPION unit

Protesters demand end to police violence after seeing Tyre Nichols' beating video

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29 January 2023

Protesters took to the streets of Memphis, Tennessee, and other cities across the US on Friday and Saturday following the release of the video showing the savage beating of Tyre Nichols by a group of police officers on January 7. The 29-year-old African American man died three days later in the hospital.

A report in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* said a group of demonstrators shut down the Interstate 55 bridge connecting Tennessee and Arkansas on Friday night. Memphis police had closed off the roads leading to the bridge, and the protesters remained there for several hours chanting, “No Justice, No Peace,” until about 9:00 p.m.

On Saturday afternoon, a crowd of 200 people continued the demonstration at one of the police stations in Memphis. NBC News reported that many of the protesters were residents of the city who expressed frustration at the long history of police violence.

Among those who are fed up with police violence was George Brooks, 44, who said, “Just growing up here, this is not really new to us. It’s new to us being on this magnitude, but this is an issue we’re tired of seeing. We’re used to having issues with police in this city.”

Rachel Spriggs, 38, also told NBC News that the release of the video and the indictment and arrest of the five officers does not settle matters with residents: “The corruption of the Memphis police and the death of Tyre Nichols, we’re just tired altogether. We need answers, because after watching the video, I have more questions.”

Demonstrator Joshua Lewis, 18, said he was not surprised by the beating of Nichols that he saw on the video. “It angered me to see the video of Tyre, but this is normal (in Memphis), and I feel that it’s time for a change. We’ve been trying to change it for years,” he said.

In a preemptive move aimed at calming public anger,

the Memphis Police Department announced the permanent deactivation of the special street crime squad that the officers who beat Nichols to death were members of.

In a public statement issued on Twitter, the police department said, “In the process of listening intently to the family of Tyre Nichols, community leaders, and the uninvolved officers who have done quality work in their assignments, it is in the best interest of all to permanently deactivate the SCORPION Unit.”

The unit—SCORPION stands for Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods—was launched in 2021 with great enthusiasm by Memphis city and police officials. However, it became clear quickly that the primary function of the unit was to drive around the city in unmarked vehicles and randomly terrorize neighborhoods and brutalize citizens.

For example, while city authorities maintain that Nichols was pulled over for reckless driving, it has been established that the SCORPION unit regularly used unsubstantiated traffic violation stops to harass, physically assault and threaten to shoot city residents.

The series of four bodycam and surveillance videos released on Friday evening showed the five cops pepper spraying, tasing, punching, kicking and hitting Nichols with a baton while he remained compliant, asking what he had done wrong and calling out for his mother. After they had beat Nichols unconscious, the officers are seen fist dapping each other like they were participating in a sporting event.

Tyre Nichols died from the injuries he suffered also because he was denied emergency medical attention by the officers and other personnel from the police and fire departments who arrived on the scene even after the beating.

The officers immediately involved in the beating—Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills Jr. and Justin Smith—were fired on January 20 and indicted and arrested for second-degree murder and other felonies on January 26. The Shelby County District Attorney said the investigation into the murder is still under way and that there may well be other indictments to come.

On Saturday, NBC News reported that demonstrations in response to the murder of Nichols also took place in Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, New York City, Providence, Dallas, Salt Lake City; Asheville and Charlotte, North Carolina; Columbus, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Other reports said there were protests in Portland and Seattle.

Very little live coverage from any of these demonstrations was provided by the major corporate news media outlets, all of which were peaceful in nature. CNN reported that several people were arrested in New York City after demonstrators marched from Washington Square in downtown Manhattan to Times Square.

To the extent that the protests were covered at all, the corporate media has focused on calls by politicians for police reform and not on the demands of protesters for an immediate end to police brutality and murder. The year 2022 was the deadliest on record, with a total of 1,186 people killed by police in the US, according to the website Mapping Police Violence which has maintained a database since 2013.

A similar database, Fatal Force, maintained by the *Washington Post*, reports that there have been 79 people killed by police so far in 2023.

While these databases show black people are killed by police in numbers that are disproportionate to the share of African Americans within the US population, the media rarely mentions that the vast majority of police killings are young men, half of the killings take place in the suburbs, and whites are the most numerous victims. This is because police violence is presented by the corporate media and political establishment as a matter of race and not class.

The ruling establishment is very concerned that the murder of Tyre Nichols could spark a social explosion with opposition to police violence intersecting with the growing movement of the working class and young people against the attacks on jobs, living standards and working conditions, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and war, alongside ever greater social inequality.

The death of Nichols at the hands of five African American police officers has created problems for the racist explanation of police violence. The *New York Times*, the journalistic center of such views about everything in American society, spelled out this dilemma on Saturday with an article entitled “Tyre Nichols Beating Opens a Complex Conversation on Race and Policing.”

Written by Clyde McGrady, the article says that the fact that “the five officers charged with Mr. Nichols’s murder are Black complicates the anguish.” McGrady goes on to write, “It has also brought into focus what many Black people have said is frequently lost in police brutality cases involving white officers and Black victims: that problems of race and policing are a function of an entrenched police culture of aggression and dehumanization of Black people more than of interpersonal racism.”

McGrady continues, “It is the system and the tactics that foster racism and violence, they say, rather than the specific racial identities of officers.”

While the events in Memphis expose this explanation for police violence as a fraud, the proponents of the racist views are doubling down on it. Attorney Benjamin Crump, who has been an outspoken representative of this outlook, was asked on Sunday morning by ABC News anchor Martha Raddatz about how such a horrifying use of violence and lack of humanity was possible in Memphis.

Crump responded, “as I’ve said, I believe it’s part of the institutionalized police culture that makes it somehow allowed that they can use this type of excessive force and brutality against people of color. And it doesn’t matter if the officers are black, Hispanic, or white, it’s part of the culture, this biased culture that said this is allowed.”



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