Body camera footage shows Knoxville, Tennessee police mocking 60-year-old Lisa Edwards before she died in their custody

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The Knoxville Police Department (KPD) and city officials are scrambling to contain the fallout in the aftermath of the release of body camera footage showing the arrest of 60-year-old Lisa Edwards, a white woman who died while in police custody on February 5 in Knoxville, Tennessee. The video shows that officers dismissed and mocked her complaints of feeling ill.

Edwards was arrested outside of Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center an hour after being discharged following a brief hospitalization. Prior to being admitted to Fort Sanders, Edwards was hospitalized at Blount Memorial Hospital in nearby Maryville, Tennessee after complaining of abdominal pain during her flight to Knoxville on February 4. Edwards had previously suffered a stroke in 2019 and subsequently became wheelchair bound.

The ruling class's contempt for life—most nakedly demonstrated by the deaths of over 1 million from COVID-19 in the US alone—found expression in the actions of the officers, who can be heard on the video repeatedly berating Edwards, degrading her and cracking jokes while accusing her of "faking it."

At one point, as officers attempted to cram Edwards, who repeatedly stated that she cannot walk, into the confined space of a transport van, one of them referred to her as "dead weight." In the midst of this, Edwards audibly gasped for air and begged for her inhaler, saying, "Oh my God, I'm going to die" over and over. Officers instead laughed as one of them offered her a cigarette while she was slumped on the pavement.

Eventually the officers called for a police cruiser to transport her because it was lower to the ground. Edwards was then dragged by the officers into the back of the cruiser while begging to be set upright, which officers again ignored. Afterwards, the officers sprayed themselves down with Lysol disinfectant.

In the back of the police cruiser, Edwards continued to gasp for air, all the while saying that she could not breathe. During her transport, Edwards is no longer visible in the footage, but she could be heard wheezing until gradually falling silent. After driving for some time, the officer stopped to perform a traffic stop. It was not until this time that the officer checked on Edwards, finding her unresponsive.

The officers involved—Brandon Wardlaw, Adam Barnett, Timothy Distasio, and Danny Dugan—have all been placed on paid administrative leave while the KPD completes its internal investigation. Meanwhile, the office of Knox County District Attorney (DA) Charme Allen has issued a statement absolving the officers of any responsibility, saying that it will not pursue criminal charges.

In its press release, the DA's office wrote, "There will be no criminal charges filed against any of the officers involved in the arrest of Lisa Edwards. An autopsy conducted by medical examiners with the Regional Forensic Center concluded that Lisa Edwards died of natural causes, namely 'ischemic stroke due to atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease' and 'that at no time did law enforcement interaction cause or contribute to Ms. Edwards' death.'"

The footage has generated widespread outrage and disgust. A compilation video of the arrest that was posted on the KPD's Facebook page has received, at the time of this writing, nearly 3,500 comments, the majority of them critical of the officers' actions.

One person wrote, "This is appalling. They treated

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her like an animal, took away her humanity, insulted and abused her while she was struggling with a medical issue. Imagine if this were your mom, sister, grandmother, aunt....just absolutely heartbreaking how she was treated by the police."

Another wrote, "I could not even watch the entire video. I was crying just hearing her plead for help! I am so disgusted with KPD. That could [have] been any of those [officers'] loved ones. To treat her that way was crazy. I pray she gets justice. It's f***ed up she died and nothing is being done to these officers..."

Others have questioned the role of the hospital, with one commenter drawing the connection between Edwards' death and the profit-driven health care system under which hospitals have been working to expedite patient treatment in order to cut costs.

They wrote, "This is what for profit health care gets you. Capitalism at its finest. I'm not even going to mention the treatment by the police. The lack of respect for human life permeates throughout our society in general. With the focus on $$$ as the sole driver of most institutions these occurrences will occur with more frequency."

The first two months of 2023 have been marked by a continuous string of police killings in the US. The death of Edwards is only the latest tragic example to be exposed. Her death follows that of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols, who was beaten to death by five African American officers in January, as well as the execution of 26-year-old Manuel "Tortuguita" Esteban Paez Terán, who was killed in a hail of gunfire by police while protesting the development of the "Cop City" training ground in Atlanta, Georgia.

The ending of police violence in the US and around the world is not a matter of better training, or more "diverse" police forces, because police violence is ultimately rooted in the capitalist system. Therefore, the struggle against police violence is intimately bound up with the struggle to transform society on the basis of socialist internationalism.

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