

Police attack protesters with tear gas and pepper spray in Akron, Ohio

Samuel Davidson
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Wednesday evening police in Akron, Ohio, dressed in full riot gear and a SWAT team attacked over 100 peaceful protesters who were voicing their anger over the June 27, 2022 police murder of 25-year-old Jayland Walker and the decision not to prosecute the eight officers involved.

Protesters had assembled at the high school from which Walker graduated and were marching throughout the neighborhood chanting slogans demanding justice and against the ongoing police brutality throughout the city and across the US.

No doubt, the police have been emboldened by the decision not to prosecute the officers who killed Walker in a hail of bullets. They know that they can attack the protesters with impunity and they are seeking to further terrorize those who challenge the decision and the community as a whole.

By all accounts, the protesters remained peaceful as they marched Wednesday. However, a little before 8:00 p.m. police in full riot gear and equipped with gas masks set up a line to block the protesters from continuing their march. The police line included a SWAT team. Video shows one woman from the march walking up to the police line in what appears to be an attempt to question what is happening.

Without warning, police began firing tear gas at the crowd. The woman who attempted to speak with the police is completely engulfed in the gas. At the same time police began advancing on the marchers releasing pepper spray as they went. Marchers, people that moved to the sidewalk and bystanders who were watching from the side were all gassed indiscriminately.

At least two reporters who were reporting on the protest were attacked and gassed as well.

Social media has been full of people speaking out and expressing their outrage over the attack.

One Twitter user wrote, “Mind blown.... How can you

just launch an attack on people who are clearly not out to hurt anybody.” Another noted, “It’s so hard to remain peaceful when the police are agitating you, I’m so proud of all these folks.”

Walker was gunned down by police in the early morning hours of June 27 after he led them on a short car chase. Police bodycam video shows Walker was killed after he exited his car and ran at most 10 paces. Video of the shooting shows that Walker had stopped running and appeared to be raising his arms in surrender when police opened fire on him.

Police have not released how many shots were fired by the eight officers that had encircled him, nor have they publicly identified the officers. The autopsy report shows that Walker was shot 46 times. Several of the police emptied their entire magazines and can be seen on video reloading. Police continued firing bullets into Walker even after he fallen onto the ground. Even after the shooting stopped, police handcuffed Walker rather than attempt any medical assistance.

On Monday afternoon, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost announced that a grand jury had decided that no criminal charges would be filed against the police who murdered Walker. Citing as justification for not indicting the officers, Yost stated that the officers feared for their lives and were therefore justified in carrying out this act of brutality.

Yost went on to say that since Walker disobeyed a police order to surrender and that he raised his hands, police were justified in thinking he had a gun.

Walker did not have a gun on him when he was shot. Several police body cam videos taken from several different angles clearly show both his hands, neither of which were holding a gun.

Far from not obeying police orders to surrender, Walker can be seen stopping, turning around, and raising his arms in surrender. Yost presented a still shot, as Walker was

raising his arms to say he was pointing at the police.

This of course could be the justification used for every police killing, since it necessary to raise one's hands to obey an order to surrender.

Every day since Yost's announcement there have been protests in different areas of Akron which have drawn residents from throughout the city and the surrounding communities. Each protest has been met with escalating police harassment and violence, culminating on Wednesday with the gassing of the protesters.

In another form of harassment, people arrested at the protests were taken not to the Summit County Jail but to the Stark County Jail, nearly 30 miles away, outside of Canton, Ohio. This was done to prevent supporters from protesting outside and making it harder for people to have bail posted and return home.

On Thursday, the Akron Bail Fund filed a suit in federal court seeking a temporary restraining order issued against the police preventing them from using pepper spray and tear gas on protesters. It is also seeking a declaration from the judge that the police violated residents' constitutional rights.

"This gross abuse of police power began nine months ago, and this week Akron continued its unconstitutional violence and censorship against these peaceful protesters and their message," civil rights attorney Sarah Gelsomino said in a statement. "We must stop Akron and its police department from further violating First Amendment rights, and this motion for an emergency order will allow demonstrators to exercise this right."

The suit noted that since protests erupted over Walker's murder, the city, Democratic mayor Dan Horrigan and the police force have worked to prevent the free expression of speech and attack, arrest and harass those involved.

"Beginning on the Fourth of July and in the days that followed," the lawsuit said. "Mayor Horrigan implemented an unconstitutional curfew order quashing protest speech; Akron police indiscriminately assaulted and teargassed protestors; and City officials arrested, charged, and initiated prosecution against protesters en masse in retaliation for their protected speech and expressive conduct."

Supporting the lawsuit, three members of the Akron Bail Fund who witnessed Wednesday's attack on the protest filed affidavits in which they asserted that the police attack was completely unprovoked and directed indiscriminately against protesters, supporters, and bystanders. They document children as young as six years old being sprayed with tear gas and pepper spray.

The lawsuit notes that before Monday's announcement, city officials and the police deemed public areas off limits for protesting and blocked other public areas in violation of peoples' First Amendment rights to free speech.

On Monday evening following the announcement that no charges would be filed against the police officers, protesters marched throughout the downtown area and near the courthouse. About 70 people followed the protesters in their cars honking their horns and showing support. Around 7:30 p.m. police began handing out tickets and arrested six of the protesters for various traffic violations.

"The city has no justification for its preemptive suppression of speech or its ongoing retaliation against speech," the lawsuit said. "What's more, this misconduct by Akron is a continuation of the same misconduct it used to censor the same message from many of the same demonstrators when police killed Jayland Walker last year."

In the weeks following the murder of Walker, tens of thousands took part in protest against the police. These were part of a general uprising of opposition to police killings over the past few years. The police, with the full backing of Mayor Horrigan, conducted a campaign of terror against protesters, imposing a curfew, using tear gas and pepper spray to break up protests and arresting dozens of people. Many of those arrested were jailed for over 36 hours without access to their medications.

The arrests were part of the city's campaign of terror against the protesters. The vast majority of those arrested have either had the charges dropped or were acquitted. A few are still awaiting trial. No one has been convicted.

Calls for reform of the police fall on deaf ears. Both Democrats and Republicans are supporting the growing power of the police, including providing police with military-level equipment. Each year more than 1,000 people are murdered at the hands of police. Last year, 2022, saw 1,190 killed, the highest number in the past decade.

Police brutality and murder can only be fought as part of a movement of the working class against the capitalist system and the inequality it creates.



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