

FBI indictments allege California cops engaged in violent terror campaign against East Bay residents for years

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Over the last month, serious felony crimes against police officers in three different California departments spread across four federal indictments and two plea deals have been filed. It is expected that more indictments and guilty pleas in connection with those already announced will be released in the coming months.

In an August 17 press conference held in San Francisco, US Attorney Ismail Ramsey announced the four federal indictments, charging 10 police officers, from two different Bay Area, California, police departments, Antioch and Pittsburg, with multiple crimes including excessive force, fraud, distributing anabolic steroids and falsifying police reports. Arrest warrants have already been served in Texas, Hawaii and California.

For over two years, the FBI and the Contra Costa County district attorney's office have been investigating dozens of cops, including in "leadership" positions at both police departments.

Antioch and Pittsburg are both located in the East Bay area 45 miles northeast of San Francisco. Antioch, with a population of over 110,000, is the third largest city in Contra Costa County, while over 76,000 people, mostly working class, reside in Pittsburg. The largest employer in Antioch is Kaiser Permanente, while top employers in Pittsburg include the Dow Chemical Company and US Steel, both of which operate facilities in the industrial suburb.

The most serious indictment unveiled by Ramsey charges three Antioch police officers, Morteza Amiri, Eric Allen Rombough and Deveon Christopher Wenger, with deprivation of rights under color of law, which carries with it a possible 10-year prison sentence. Amiri and Rombough have been with the Antioch Police Department since 2017, while Wenger was hired in July 2018.

Amiri and Rombough had been previously identified earlier this year by Contra Costa County Judge Clare Maier, as two of at least 17 Antioch police officers involved in a seemingly department-wide text chain in which dozens of police shared racist, homophobic and ultra-violent messages that revealed "dishonesty, perjury, abuse of authority, and the violation of individuals' civil rights," per a redacted March 27, 2023 Contra Costa County disclosure report.

In April, public defender Ellen McDonnell from the Contra Costa County Public Defenders' Office alleged that at least 45 Antioch police officers, nearly half of the 99 in the department at the time, participated in text chains in which cops described criminal activity they had engaged in and/or included language that was "racist, homophobic, and violent." Public defender McDonnell revealed at least 16 of the officers were/are in "leadership roles."

"There's an internal affairs officer that's part of these messages," McDonnell said, adding, "[S]howing once again the police cannot police the police." One of the police officers named is Rick Hoffman, the president of the Antioch Police Officers Association (APOA), which is the city's police union.

In his indictment of Amiri, Rombough and Wenger, attorney Ramsey wrote that while employed at APD, the three police "conspired and agreed together and with each other, and with others known and unknown to the Grand Jury, to injure, oppress, threaten, and intimidate residents of Antioch, California and the Northern District of California."

The indictment alleges the three cops communicated with each other, and others, "about their actual and intended uses of force, including about specific violent acts that constituted excessive uses of force by a police officer..."

The cops agreed to "carry out such violent acts against individuals in and around Antioch even where the force was excessive, knowing that certain of their actions were excessive uses of force by a police officer..."

Prosecutors allege the police collected "trophies" from crime scenes and touted unnecessary and illegal "deployments" of K-9 units and 40 mm "less-lethal" rounds against the residents of Antioch, and others, who in many cases had never committed a crime or were already detained. The three officers and others gleefully shared photographs of the violence they inflicted on working class residents and offered words of encouragement to each other.

The prosecutors write that as a K9 officer, Amiri, beginning in

2019, messaged multiple police in the department and bragged about the “gory pics” he would take after siccing his dog named “Purcy” on residents. Amiri numbered the pictures and would often include commentary, “just got #3”, “#4 on fire [right now] ... [laughing out loud].” The last photograph included in the indictment is number “28.”

Rombough and Wegner are accused of using a 40 mm less lethal launcher to inflict similar debilitating and grievous injuries on residents of Antioch. Both men encouraged one another and others to photograph injuries caused by the weapon with their personal cell phones and share it with other police. Rombough is alleged to have collected the spent casings from each time he fired a 40 mm round at a resident as part of a “trophy” American flag that he was planning to place on his “mantle.”

Text messages in the indictment show Rombough gloating about beating suspects. “... he got his [a**] whooped in the back and I field goal kicked his head. I tried to knock him unconscious. And he got muzzle thumped 6 times before he gave us his hands.”

In their racist and homophobic text messages to each other, the police liberally used the N-word and photos of gorillas in reference to black people, including the mayor of Antioch and current police chief. Prosecutors allege the thuggish cops bragged regularly about “violating civil rights” and using excessive force as “punishment” for people they felt had not been appropriately reprimanded by the US criminal justice system.

In one 2020 text exchange, Amiri describes putting his pistol in the mouth of a homeless person he accused of stealing his mail. “Lol. Putting a pistol in someone’s mouth and telling them to stop stealing isn’t illegal,” he texted to another cop.

In order to cover their tracks, the police often deleted body camera footage, lied in their police reports and encouraged each other to “continue the scheme to deprive the individuals in and around Antioch of their constitutional rights.”

The FBI procured text messages from the police as part of an over two-year investigation into the police departments of Antioch and Pittsburg, California. In addition to an anabolic steroid drug ring, officers in both departments are accused of running an illegal education scheme in order to defraud taxpayers.

Instead of going to classes, cops hired people to go to classes and take the tests for them. The police would then claim to their departments they had obtained certain college degrees or accreditations in order to be eligible for higher pay. Seven cops across both departments have been indicted for conspiracy to commit wire fraud as part of this scheme, including the aforementioned Amiri (APD), Patrick James Berhan (Pittsburg PD), Brauli Rodriguez Jalapa (Pittsburg PD and Oakland Housing Authority), Ernesto Juan Mejia-Orozco (Pittsburg PD), Samantha Genoveva Peterson (Antioch PD) and Amanda Theodosy (Pittsburg PD).

Antioch cops Wegner and Daniel Harris were also charged with several counts related to distributing steroids.

As of May 2023, 38 Antioch police officers were on paid administrative leave, while just 34 were on active duty, according to Antioch Chief of Police Steven Ford. Nearly all of the three dozen officers on leave are currently under criminal investigations.

The massive criminality revealed in the court papers eviscerate claims from reformists and apologists for the capitalist system that police violence is relegated to a “few bad apples.” The police, the front-line soldiers of capital, empowered to terrorize the working class with almost complete impunity, cannot be “reformed” into serving the interests of the broader population. Under conditions of a growing strike wave and widening inequality, the ruling class is increasingly cultivating backward attitudes and violent tactics, honed on battlefields abroad, in departments around the country.

In a federal plea deal unveiled on Tuesday, former Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department Deputy Miguel Angel Vega, 33, of Corona, California, admitted that he falsely imprisoned a 23-year-old skateboarder, identified as J.A., in his patrol car, which he then later crashed in an unwarranted police chase, that left the man injured. In the plea deal, Vega admitted to lying on police reports that J.A. was using drugs in order to cover up for his and his partner’s criminality.

Vega’s former partner, Christopher Blair Hernandez, 37, had previously pleaded guilty in July to one count of conspiracy related to the incident. Multiple press reports have confirmed that Vega was the police officer who shot and killed 18-year-old Salvadoran-American Andres Guardado in June 2020 as protests erupted across the country against police violence following the murder of George Floyd.

Autopsy reports confirmed that Guardado, an aspiring mechanic who was enrolled in community college, was shot in the back five times by Vega. While Vega and Hernandez, along with other police, illegally destroyed security camera footage from nearby businesses showing the execution, eyewitnesses have come forward and credibly accused Vega of shooting Guardado in the back.

Vega has yet to be charged in the murder of Guardado. As of this writing, three years after his murder, the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department claims the investigation into the young worker’s killing is “ongoing.”



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