

Trump pardons Washington, D.C. police officers convicted for murder of unarmed motorist

Nick Barrickman
27 January 2025

On Wednesday, the newly-installed Trump administration issued pardons for Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) officers Terence Sutton and Andrew Zabavsky, convicted of charges of conspiracy and second-degree murder for conduct surrounding their reckless vehicle pursuit of 20-year old father Karon Hylton-Brown in 2020, which resulted in the latter's death.

Sutton and Zabavsky were serving 5.5 and 4.5 year sentences, respectively, for their conduct on the night of October 23, 2020, in which their pursuit of Hylton-Brown on his moped resulted in his death in a traffic collision.

The officers claim to have initiated the chase after Sutton spotted Hylton-Brown driving without a helmet, a minor traffic violation. Police procedure in the District of Columbia forbids officers from initiating a chase over such violations, unless "[T]he fleeing suspect has committed or attempted to commit a crime of violence or poses an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to another person." Hylton-Brown did not pose a threat or threaten violence.

According to the *Washington Post*, following the crash the two officers "turned off their body cameras and conferred with each other" at the scene of the accident, deciding to sweep the matter under the rug by allowing the driver who struck Hylton-Brown to leave the scene without getting a statement.

Likewise, "the officers did not notify the department's major crash unit, as was required, or secure the crash site for evidence collection." They also minimized the incident when reporting it to their shift captain, implying Hylton-Brown had been drunk and only been in a minor traffic injury. He died several days

later.

Major news publications' efforts to reach Hylton-Brown's family following the pardons have been unsuccessful. David L. Shurtz, a lawyer representing Amaala Jones-Bey, the mother of Hylton-Brown's child, stated the pardons were "outrageous, especially with Sutton," because of the latter's additional conviction of second-degree murder. "By their actions afterward, the coverup, it's implicit that [Sutton and Zabavsky] knew they were guilty."

Trump, in announcing his intention to pardon the two cops, displayed an astonishing lack of familiarity with the facts of the case. The officers "were arrested, put in jail for five years because they went after an illegal," Trump said, adding, "I guess something happened where something went wrong, and they arrested the two officers and put them in jail for going after a criminal." In fact, Hylton-Brown was an American citizen by birth without a criminal record.

Edward Martin, Trump's interim US Attorney for the District of Columbia, likewise wrote on X that he would "Free these guys and... go get the bad guys." Martin's statements are ironic given his previous history, which includes representing several of Trump's foot soldiers who raided the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 as part of the President's coup attempt. Martin was also an organizer of the fraudulent "Stop the Steal" campaign which Trump used to mobilize his supporters to overturn the election in 2020.

Hylton-Brown's death sparked outrage in Washington, D.C. The death came amid months of mass protests in every state and across the world following the police murder of George Floyd in

Minneapolis in May 2020.

At the time, Trump responded to the mass outpouring with venomous hostility, mobilizing the National Guard and other government agencies while threatening to invoke martial law throughout the country. The plot Trump hatched to overthrow the 2020 presidential election was itself heavily motivated by the mass protests confronting the American ruling class at this time.

The pardons in the District of Columbia come as his administration has pardoned and commuted the sentences of over 1,600 of those responsible for ransacking the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. Trump is seeking to roll back any concessions that were made to popular opposition, as part of a generalized effort to establish a presidential dictatorship resting on the support of law enforcement agencies and fascist militias.

In response to the 2020 upheaval, the Democratic Party sought to enact symbolic measures to placate anti-police brutality demonstrations while working to shut them down through a combination of racist demagoguery and brute force. This was part of an effort to channel opposition back into the Biden presidential campaign, even as Democrats sought to downplay the threat of Trump's coup attempt which was launched in June 2020.

The predictable result of this is that the Democratic Party has managed to clear the way for Trump's right wing backlash against even the most limited reforms.

The Trump administration has revoked many of the tepid executive orders first issued by Biden to mollify opposition to police brutality. Biden issued an executive order in 2022 implementing aspects of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act after the bill failed to pass the Senate.

The MPD issued a statement that fully embraced Trump's pardons, thanking "President Trump and Interim U.S. Attorney Ed Martin for supporting our officers." The statement further declared that it believed the incident, resulting in a young man's unnecessary death, "should be addressed through training and discipline" instead of prosecution.

Underscoring the MPD's response, former D.C. police chief Peter Newsham told the *Post*, "For them to pursue a police officer under these circumstances is unjust." In fact, the prosecution and conviction of

Sutton and Zabavsky was fully in line with the crimes they committed. To suggest they had just been doing their jobs when they initiated a fatal chase and then tried to cover it up is to imply they are above the law.

For his part, Newsham, as D.C.'s police chief from 2017 to 2020, oversaw the District's ferocious military and law enforcement response to the mass protests.

Washington, D.C.'s government responded with indifference to Trump's pardons of the D. C. police officers. The office of Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser issued a statement which took note of the police department's opposition to the guilty verdicts. While the latter would prefer to deal with the "unfortunate loss of life" through "MPD's administrative processes not a criminal one," her office "nonetheless accepted the guilty verdicts." Bowser has regularly supported the police, seeking to expand their hiring and passing right wing "tough on crime" legislation.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact