

High school students protesting ICE remain jailed days after police assault in Pennsylvania

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At least five high school students in Quakertown, located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, have now been held in police custody for more than 72 hours following last Friday's anti-ICE protest. As of this writing, authorities have not publicly clarified how many students remain detained, what specific charges they face, or why juveniles are being held for this length of time.

Their alleged offense: defending themselves after a police chief, not in uniform, physically assaulted students. The police assault has provoked mass outrage in the community and throughout the country. A Change.org petition demanding the resignation of Quakertown Police Chief Scott McElree, who was captured on video choking a young female student, has exceeded 7,800 signatures as of this writing.

Separately, a GoFundMe to support students' expected attorneys' fees and medical costs associated with the police assault has raised nearly \$33,000.

The department and Chief McElree have refused to issue a public statement explaining the use of force. No detailed charging documents have been released. Instead, silence.

The refusal to release basic information raises serious questions. Why are minors being held for days without public clarification of charges? Why has there been no immediate statement from the department explaining the conduct of its chief? Why has there been no release of body-camera footage?

The police are engaged in a cover-up aimed at suppressing not only students, but everyone's democratic right to peacefully protest.

The assault in Quakertown is not an isolated incident. Across the country, students participating in anti-ICE

demonstrations have faced physical attacks and threats.

On February 2 in Buda, Texas, 45-year-old Chad Michael Watts, wearing a red "Make America Great Again" hat, exited his truck and targeted a young female student during a peaceful protest. Social media video shows Watts advancing toward the student, prompting classmates to intervene in her defense. Watts was arrested and charged with two misdemeanor counts of assault causing bodily injury.

On February 10, students at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, California reported that an older man threatened to shoot them while they participated in an anti-ICE protest. Video footage shows students screaming and retreating around a black truck after the unidentified man allegedly issued the threat. The incident carries particular weight given that Saugus High was the site of a mass shooting in 2019.

In Grand Island, Nebraska, a 54-year-old man, Michael Brown, attacked students participating in a February 16 walkout. Brown was initially charged with child abuse. As of last Thursday, those charges had been dropped.

In each case, students engaging in protest activity became targets of physical aggression. In some instances, adult attackers were charged. In others, charges were reduced or dropped. In Quakertown, however, it is the students who remain behind bars while police leadership refuses public explanation.

As of Monday afternoon, it is still unclear whether the students will be released or remain in custody. No charges against the students have been publicly disclosed, and the department has not issued a detailed statement on the incident. Police have yet to release any body or dash camera footage captured that day.

Holding minors for more than 48 hours after they were assaulted by police is extraordinary. The continued detention of these students underscores that this has nothing to do with “public safety,” but is focused on suppressing dissent and protecting official misconduct.

In a statement issued Monday, ACLU of Pennsylvania Legal Director Witold Walczak said:

On Friday, students in Quakertown made the decision to peacefully exercise their First Amendment rights and organize a public demonstration to protest continued and escalating abuses by ICE. By all accounts, including abundant video evidence, there were no issues at the demonstration until Quakertown police arrived and incited violence.

Walczak added:

The ACLU of Pennsylvania is in touch with the student demonstrators. We’re calling for a full and transparent investigation of this incident and for the police and Chief McElree to be held accountable for their actions if the evidence confirms the apparent excessive force, retaliation and false arrest.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker and candidate for UAW president, released a statement Sunday night condemning the assault on students. “This was, plain and simple, police brutality against children,” Lehman said.

Lehman works at the Mack-Volvo plant, only a half hour away from Quakertown High School. He noted that the students’ actions are part of the city’s “rich tradition of resistance.”

Just over a mile from their school, freedom seekers once passed through this town on the Underground Railroad. Local abolitionists, including Quaker families, opened their homes

as safe houses and defied the Fugitive Slave Act, which armed slavecatchers with the “legal” authority to seize human beings even in free states. Then, as now, the law was invoked to justify the pursuit of working-class people whose only “crime” was seeking freedom and a better life. The slavecatchers of that era and the thugs of ICE today serve the same reactionary purposes.

Lehman called for all charges against the students and their supporters to be dropped and for all those responsible for the violation of constitutional rights, from the police to the Trump administration, to be held accountable. Instead of appealing to the same politicians and political parties that have empowered and turned a blind eye to police violence, Lehman proposed the formation of rank-and-file committees comprised of workers, students, and teachers to “respond to raids, arrests and suspensions.”

“Only an organized working-class movement, acting independently of the pro-corporate union bureaucracies and both corporate-controlled parties, can abolish ICE and dismantle the police-state apparatus,” he concluded.



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