

Trial begins for police officer in Freddie Gray murder

By Andre Damon
1 December 2015

Jury selection began Monday in the trial of one of six Baltimore, Maryland officers charged in connection with the killing of 25-year-old Freddie Gray last April. The beginning of the trial comes one week after the release of a video showing the execution-style police murder of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois.

Despite ongoing demonstrations against police violence, the reign of police terror in the US continues unabated. Since the killing of Freddie Gray on April 19, 728 people have been killed by police officers in the United States. According to one tally, 1,083 people have been killed by the police in the US so far this year, compared with 1,018 at the same time last year.

Baltimore Circuit Court Judge Barry Williams initiated proceedings against police officer William Porter by interviewing 66 prospective jurors. Porter is charged with manslaughter, assault, misconduct and reckless endangerment.

Porter, who is black, was called in as backup in the arrest of Gray on April 12. Gray, who according to bystander footage was visibly injured during the arrest, was placed without a seatbelt into the back of a police van, where he was apparently given a “rough ride” while shackled, which likely led to his death a week later.

Gray was charged with possessing an illegal knife after he “made eye contact” with a Baltimore police officer and ran when he was chased. Baltimore State’s Attorney Marilyn Mosby said that, since the knife was not a switchblade and was not illegal to possess, Gray’s arrest was unlawful.

Witnesses said they could hear Gray crying out that officers were hurting him and calling repeatedly for medical aid. By the time he arrived at a local police station he was not breathing and his heart had stopped.

According to the results of an internal police

investigation provided to the Baltimore Police Department in September, Gray repeatedly told Porter during the van ride that he needed medical assistance, after which Porter told other officers that he could not be booked because he was in medical distress. Police provided no medical aid despite these statements.

Another officer, Alicia White, was called out to investigate citizens’ complaints about Gray’s brutal arrest. When White arrived on the scene, she “spoke to the back of Mr. Gray’s head,” according to prosecutors. “When he did not respond, she did nothing further despite the fact that she was advised that he needed a medic. She made no effort to look, assess or determine his condition.”

In early September, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said that the city would pay a \$6.4 million settlement to Gray’s family to prevent a civil lawsuit, even as prosecutors continued to press criminal charges.

Gray’s death sparked mass protests throughout Baltimore. State, local and federal officials responded to what they claimed was rioting by deploying the National Guard in the city, implementing a curfew and carrying out mass arrests.

The killing of Gray and the police response to demonstrations exposed the class divide that is at the center of police violence in America. The demonstrations expressed much broader social tensions in Baltimore, a majority African-American city whose working class has been devastated by years of deindustrialization, job losses and social inequality, all presided over by a largely black political establishment.

Baltimore’s police force, more than half of which is African-American, Hispanic, Asian or Native American, is reportedly one of the most brutal in the country. Between 2011 and early 2015, Baltimore paid

nearly \$6 million in settlements and court judgments for cases alleging officer misconduct, including the slamming of a pregnant woman into the ground, the killing of an unarmed veteran and the beating of a church deacon. Gray's death was the sixth killing by Baltimore police since the start of 2015.

Porter pleaded not guilty to the charges brought against him, as did the five other officers charged in connection with Gray's death. His trial is set to conclude by December 17. Prosecutors said they wanted to try Porter first because they are seeking to use him as a "material witness" in the upcoming trials of two other officers, White and Caesar Goodson, who is charged with second-degree murder.

The charges brought against the six officers are an attempt to placate seething opposition to police violence in Baltimore and throughout the US. The officers were charged May 1 following the crackdown on mass protests in the city and less than two weeks after Gray's death. "To the people of Baltimore and the demonstrators across America, I heard your call for 'no justice, no peace,'" Mosby said at the time.

All six officers charged in connection to the case received preferential treatment, according to a column published in the *New York Times* by Baltimore public defender Todd Oppenheim. He noted that the officers' bail amounts of \$250,000 to \$350,000 were extremely low. "A protester charged with much less serious offenses, including disorderly conduct and malicious destruction of property during the unrest following Mr. Gray's death, received a \$500,000 bail."

Also Monday, Jason Van Dyke, the Chicago police officer charged with murder in connection with the death of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald last year, was released on bail. Last Tuesday, Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez announced murder charges against Van Dyke, the same day as authorities released a video showing the officer shooting the teenager sixteen times, with most of the shots fired while McDonald was lying on the ground.

Despite more than a thousand police murders over the course of the past year, dozens of which gained national attention, only a small handful of officers have been charged, and no officers have been convicted in any of the high-profile police killings in the fifteen months since the August 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

This is because killer cops enjoy the protection of the entire state apparatus, from local prosecutors to state officials and the federal government. The Obama administration, while sanctioning the deployment of the National Guard to crack down on demonstrators in the St. Louis area and Baltimore, has sided with the cops every time a police use of force case has come before the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, the White House has continued its programs to funnel military hardware to local law enforcement, helping to arm local police with assault and sniper rifles, military-style body armor and helmets, and armored vehicles.

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