

Video of tasing, arrest of Milwaukee Bucks basketball star sparks national outrage

By Benjamin Mateus
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The release Wednesday of a video showing the tasing and arrest of 23-year-old African American Sterling Brown, a Milwaukee Bucks basketball star, by a gang up of Milwaukee, Wisconsin police officers over a minor parking infraction in January of this year has created a national sensation.

Police body camera video shows the officer who first confronted Brown standing outside of a Walgreen's drug store by a car parked across two lanes in a handicapped zone. Brown emerges from the store and the police officer immediately engages in an aggressive and provocative manner. His questions are curt and intended to intimidate Brown into an altercation. Despite the calm manner in which Brown conducts himself the officer calls for back up.

Very soon other squad cars appear on the scene and multiple officers surround Brown and quickly throw him to the ground. An officer is heard calling out, "Taser! Taser! Taser!" after which the stun gun is fired. Brown was arrested and held in custody for approximately 18 hours. He was released without being charged.

The Milwaukee Police Department (MPD), the office of Democratic Mayor Tom Barrett, the police union and community groups have been bracing for the release of the video and priming public opinion by releasing selective details about the incident over the last several days.

MPD Chief Alfonso Morales, who took over as the police department's interim leader just three weeks after Brown's arrest and was named chief in April, made a brief statement to the effect that the officers involved had been disciplined for the manner in which they "inappropriately... tased and arrested" Brown.

Subsequently, Barrett held a press conference where he told reporters, "As a human being, I am offended by

what I saw on the video. As a mayor I am committed to improving police-community relations. Mr. Brown deserves an apology and I'm very sorry the Milwaukee Police treated him in the fashion he was treated in."

The president of the Milwaukee branch of the NAACP, Fred Royal, has called for changes in the police department. The African American Round Table also held a press conference demanding a complete review of the police department and new community police guidelines as well as firing of the officers in the video.

"Black people in Milwaukee will continue to live in fear and these instances will continue to intensify the divide between MPD and community," said Markasa Tucker, the director of the African American Round Table.

Concurrent with the video's release, the Milwaukee Police Association, the officer's union, released a statement justifying the tasing and arrest of Brown for poorly parking his car.

"Use of force will never look pretty, but it is—unfortunately, a necessary component of policing... Inevitably every use of force will be scrutinized and often opinion gets in the way of fact. Unfortunately, society and local leaders only take issue when the situation is sensational, or the individual is of prominence."

The union placed the blame for the attack on Brown on understaffing which results in police officers working alone and placing themselves at increased risk, compelling them to use "higher levels of force."

Meanwhile Milwaukee Bucks released a statement in support of Sterling Brown and observed, "... this isn't an isolated case. It shouldn't require an incident involving a professional athlete to draw attention to the fact that vulnerable people in our communities have

experienced similar, and even worse, treatment.”

The statement concluded by giving its support to working with local leaders and organizations to “foster safe neighborhoods and better our community.”

In 2016, Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin activated the National Guard following an outbreak of unrest on Milwaukee’s impoverished Sherman Park neighborhood after the killing of Sylville Smith, a 23-year-old black man, who was fleeing from the police.

Tensions between the police and the residents of the city’s working-class neighborhoods persist as police violence continues, despite various cosmetic reforms since 2016, including the expanded use of body cameras and the hiring of a Hispanic police chief.

Approximately 1,000 people are killed every year by US police, with blacks and Native Americans being disproportionately killed but whites making up the largest share. Thousands more are the subjects of police brutality. What unites almost all the cases is that the victims are poor and working class.

The invocation of racism as the ultimate cause of police violence and the demand for reforms to improve relations with the police obscures the socio-economic roots of the horrific incidents of police killings and beatings that plague working class communities across the United States. Milwaukee’s median household income is just \$36,801 and 28.4 of the population lives in poverty, more than double the national rate.

Brown is fortunate enough to be a professional basketball player with a million-dollar contract and the prestige and political clout of the Milwaukee Bucks organization to defend his democratic rights, something few working-class victims of police violence, regardless of their race, ever receive.

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