

Florida police officer charged with planting drugs during traffic stops

By Matthew Taylor
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Jackson County, Florida Sheriff's Deputy Zachary Wester was arrested on July 10 after being charged with 52 crimes related to planting evidence on drivers who he subsequently arrested. The charges include racketeering, fabricating evidence, official misconduct, false imprisonment, and possession of a controlled substance.

Using evidence obtained partly from body cam videos prosecutors have alleged that Wester planted methamphetamine, marijuana, or drug paraphernalia on dozens of drivers. Already eight Floridians serving prison sentences have been released from custody and had their cases dismissed due to the charges against Wester. Another 119 people have had charges against them dropped and an additional 263 cases related to the officer are under review.

If convicted Wester faces up to thirty years in prison.

According to prosecutors Wester would typically pull his victims over for a minor traffic violation and then claim that he could smell marijuana. He would then ask for permission to search his victim's car. They would then give him permission, believing they had nothing to hide but after a short search Wester would "discover" the drugs and arrest the victim.

Wester at times turned his body camera on and off during the searches. This was one of the first suspicious signs that Christina Pumphrey, a newly hired assistant state's attorney, noticed when she started investigating Wester's arrest record. She had begun investigating Wester after complaints from public defenders drew her attention to the fact that a disproportionate number of drug arrests in the small, rural county in the Florida Panhandle were being performed by the officer.

Upon investigating the circumstances of the arrests, Pumphrey found that the officer's arrest reports would sometimes contradict the footage from the body cam.

She also took note of the fact that an unusually high number of drivers arrested by Wester protested their innocence at the scene of the arrests.

Most of Wester's victims were impoverished workers whom the deputy evidently thought would not be believed when they contradicted his story. Many also had previous drug arrests, which Wester likely believed would bolster his case.

Pumphrey brought her concerns to her superiors, who pressured her to stop investigating Wester. Eventually, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) took up the case. Pumphrey later resigned and is now suing her former employers.

The FDLE investigation resulted in Wester being fired last fall after multiple bags of marijuana and methamphetamine were found in the trunk of his car along with drug paraphernalia. It took several months for the investigation to proceed, and it was hindered when Hurricane Michael impacted the area last year.

Wester was finally arrested last week and is currently out on bond.

Wester had previously worked in a neighboring county for the Liberty County Sheriff's department but left in disgrace after it was discovered that he was having sexual relationships with both a confidential informant and a woman he had arrested for shoplifting. The Sheriff of Liberty County claims that he had asked one of his captains to fire Wester but the officer allowed Wester to resign instead. Wester was quickly able to find employment in Jackson County, where his father had formerly served as a deputy.

Thus far nine of Wester's victims have filed a federal lawsuit against the county alleging "grave mental anguish, pain, and suffering, loss of capacity for the enjoyment of life, embarrassment, humiliation, loss of reputation, lost employment opportunities, lost wages,

and the loss of other emoluments.”

Whatever compensation Wester’s victims receive due to their lawsuit will not erase the injustice done to them. In addition to the time spent in jails and prisons, as well as the money spent on bail and fines, many of those Wester framed suffered in other ways as well. One man who had previously been arrested lost custody of his daughter over the charges and all have had their reputations stained.

Left unanswered so far is the question of who else in the Jackson County Sherriff’s department knew of Wester’s crimes. In some of the cases that have been dismissed other deputies were present for the bogus arrests. In all of the cases, a vigilant prosecutor should have noticed the suspicious nature of the arrests but was likely motivated to ignore any inconsistencies so as to burnish their conviction statistics.

As Pumphrey explained to the media, because the state’s attorney in any given county is an elected official, they are highly motivated to increase their conviction rate so as to improve their chances of re-election. “The state attorney’s office was just as bad and just as guilty as Zach Wester when we found this out and were not dropping these cases immediately, in my mind...When it was ignorance it was one thing, but as soon as we know there are innocent people sitting in jail and we don’t drop the charges, we’re as guilty as he is.”

The Wester case is an illustration of how the so-called “war on drugs” is little more than a pretext for an ongoing campaign of terror against the working class. For decades law enforcement on the state, county, and federal level have all justified their vast budgets and outrageous tactics by citing the need to fight drug trafficking. The result has been the growth of the largest prison population in the world, both by the percentage of the population and in overall numbers.

Currently, that number sits at 2.3 million. This does not include the millions more who are on probation, parole, or some other form of supervised release.

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