

Protesters pepper-sprayed outside Rhode Island ICE facility after officer drives truck into crowd

By Trévon Austin
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An Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer was placed on administrative leave after driving his pickup truck through a group of Jewish protesters Wednesday night outside of the Donald W. Wyatt Detention Facility in Central Falls, Rhode Island. A 64-year-old man, identified by protesters as Jerry Belair, suffered a broken leg, internal bleeding and a possible back injury in the assault.

The suspended officer was identified in a statement released by the ICE facility as Captain Thomas Woodworth. Representatives would not confirm whether Woodworth was behind the wheel of the truck, but a video of the incident showed protesters shouting Woodworth's name as they surrounded the vehicle.

The episode unfolded as Woodworth allegedly accelerated towards protesters sitting peacefully on the ground outside of the facility's employee parking lot. The video shows a truck nearly ramming into a line of people while the driver honked his horn. The group of protesters stood and surrounded the vehicle, shouting "shame" at the truck driver. An individual also jumped into the truck's cargo bed to try to dissuade the driver from moving. The driver then accelerated again before stopping shortly after and screaming is heard.

Soon after, police officers approached the scene and demanded the group move away from the truck while protesters chanted "The whole world is watching." One of the officers claimed to be a federal official. After about 45 seconds, one agent is seen unleashing a cloud of pepper spray, causing the group to disperse. About a dozen people were treated for irritation due to pepper spray and one other went to the hospital for minor injuries.

The protest outside the facility was organized under

the banner of the Never Again protest movement, which has drawn parallels between the Trump Administration's treatment of migrants and that of the Jewish people during the Holocaust by the Nazis. Similar demonstrations organized by Jewish groups have been held outside ICE offices and detention centers nationally this summer.

Protesters have been at the Wyatt center since July, but they say it is the first time any of their demonstrations ended in violence.

The group released a statement Thursday, saying, "Last night we experienced a small example of the violence that ICE uses against our immigrant neighbors every day. As Jews, our families taught us the lessons of the Holocaust, and we promised that we would speak out and act if we ever saw a group of people being targeted, dehumanized, and rounded up.

"We are answering the call of our ancestors to sound the alarm: #NeverAgainIsNow. Every person in the United States needs to join the fight to close the concentration camps, shut down ICE, and secure permanent protection for all undocumented people in the U.S."

J. Aaron Regunberg, a former Democratic state representative who has been participating in the demonstrations, reported in a statement on Facebook that local police at the scene declined to intervene on behalf of the protesters, arrest Woodworth, or even take witness statements from protesters.

"I also want to make very clear that literally dozens of us from tonight's protest asked, clamored, demanded that the police take witness statements about the attack, and they actively refused to do so," Regunberg wrote. "What kind of violence is someone

like that willing to regularly unleash on powerless detainees, inside a prison where there are no cameras and no accountability?”

Rhode Island’s attorney general’s office and state police announced Thursday that an investigation would be opened into the attack.

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