

New York Police Department fires cop who killed Eric Garner

By Sandy English
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The New York Police Department (NYPD) fired Officer Daniel Pantaleo, the cop who strangled to death Staten Island resident Eric Garner on July 17, 2014.

It has taken over five years for the American state—especially New York City’s Democratic political establishment—to give the perpetrator of one the most visible and notorious police killings in decades even the most minimal punishment available.

Had the administration of the “progressive” Mayor Bill De Blasio failed to do so, the authorities risked sparking mass protests during a hot summer in which working-class New Yorkers have been dumping buckets of water on cops to express their hatred of the NYPD.

That the NYPD brass dismissed Pantaleo grudgingly was plain when Police Commissioner James O’Neill implicitly blamed Garner for his own death. O’Neill prefaced the announcement of his decision to fire Pantaleo at a press conference on Monday with the remark: “some people choose to verbally and/or physically resist the enforcement action lawfully being taken against them ... Those situations are unpredictable and dangerous to everyone involved. The street is never the right place to argue the appropriateness of an arrest.”

O’Neill noted that the NYPD ranks would be unhappy with the decision and Pantaleo’s treatment, and took time to praise Pantaleo as “a hardworking police officer with a family, a man who took this job to do good, to make a difference in his home community [who] has now lost his chosen career. And that is a different kind of tragedy.”

Eric Garner’s daughter, Emerald Snipes-Garner, addressed herself to O’Neill at a press conference: “You finally made a decision that should have been made five years ago.” She promised, “We will be

going after the rest of the officers involved because it’s not over.”

Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced, “Today, we finally saw a step toward justice and accountability. We saw a process that was actually fair and impartial, and I hope this will now bring the Garner family a sense of closure and the beginning of some peace.” De Blasio said nothing about the “fairness and impartiality” of the grand jury’s failure to indict Pantaleo or the Justice Department’s refusal to bring civil rights charges against him.

During the Democratic presidential debate in Detroit last month, de Blasio received jibes about not firing Pantaleo from fellow candidate Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and was heckled from the audience by demonstrators who demanded that he “fire Pantaleo.”

Pressure has been building in the city’s ruling circles to get rid of Pantaleo. On Sunday the *New York Times* obtained a 46-page finding by the NYPD’s administrative judge Rosemarie Maldonado, who oversaw the departmental trial of Pantaleo in May and June.

It noted that “[Pantaleo’s] use of a chokehold fell so far short of objective reasonableness that this tribunal found it to be reckless—a gross deviation from the standard of conduct established for a New York City police officer.” The finding also called Pantaleo’s denials of using a chokehold, “implausible and self-serving.” Earlier this month Maldonado had publicly recommended Pantaleo be fired.

Eric Garner died after police arrived at a street corner in Staten Island’s impoverished Tompkinsville neighborhood and sought to arrest him for selling untaxed cigarettes. Garner, who had been a target of police harassment in the past, objected. Police officers attempted to detain him, and Pantaleo applied a

chokehold to Garner, who cried out 11 times, “I can’t breathe!”

Garner received no medical attention at the site of the killing, despite the presence of EMTs, and was only pronounced dead at a hospital. Chokeholds, defined as “pressure to the throat or windpipe, which may prevent or hinder breathing or reduce intake of air,” have been banned by the NYPD’s patrol manual since in 1993.

A bystander video-recorded the incident on his cell phone. The video became a political symbol of police violence as literally millions watched in horror as an unarmed man was killed by a gang of NYPD officers.

Although the city’s coroner pronounced his death a homicide, a Staten Island grand jury empaneled by then-District Attorney Dan Donovan did not charge Pantaleo with a crime. Just last month, after stalling for five years, the federal Department of Justice refused to press civil rights violation charges on Pantaleo. The verdict of the ruling class is that Pantaleo will never face criminal charges for his violent and illegal actions.

Garner’s case, along with other high-profile police killings in 2014, such as that of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, led to demonstrations by workers and students across the US. New York City saw some of the biggest demonstrations since the anti-Iraq war protests of 2003–2005.

Building on the example of his predecessor, now apologist-in-chief for the crimes of Donald Trump, billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg continued the “broken windows” program of policing Rudy Giuliani initiated—in which police proactively harass people, particularly working-class youth, to “deter” low-level crimes. This was the practice that led the cops to confront Garner in the first place. It was behind the massive program of stop-and-frisk of hundreds of thousands of mostly minority youth during Bloomberg’s 12 years in office.

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