

New York City police commissioner defends vehicular assault on protesters

By Erik Schreiber
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New York City police officers who drove their vehicles into a crowd of people protesting police brutality did not violate the New York Police Department's (NYPD) policy on the use of force, Commissioner Dermot Shea declared last week. The commissioner made this remark during a public hearing convened by New York State Attorney General Letitia James, who is investigating the NYPD's response to the massive protests that erupted in the city over the brutal murder of George, Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, actions that are continuing a month later.

Knowing that city and state officials from both the Democratic and Republican parties will support him, Shea had no hesitation in defending his officers, despite the broad outrage that greeted a video that documented the incident.

The police assault took place in Brooklyn on May 30. Video that circulated widely on social media shows a police car stopped in front of a barricade in the middle of a road. A crowd of demonstrators are standing in front of the car. A second police van passes the first, driving straight into the crowd. Then the first car suddenly moves forward and pushes the barricade into the group of protesters.

When James asked Shea during the hearing whether driving into the protesters was an appropriate use of force, Shea replied, "I'm not saying that the police car was used as a use of force. The officers were set upon and attacked, and thankfully they were able to get out of that situation with, to my knowledge, no injuries to anyone."

Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio initially responded to the incident by defending the police and blaming the protesters. The police "didn't start this situation," he said, instead "The situation was started by a group of protesters converging on a police vehicle, attacking that vehicle." De Blasio added that it was "inappropriate for protesters to surround a police vehicle and threaten police

officers," even though the videos do not show protesters surrounding either police car. The mayor said he was not "going to blame officers who were trying to deal with an absolutely impossible situation." After harsh criticism, de Blasio tempered, but did not withdraw, his remarks.

Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo also felt obliged to respond. He called videos of some of the protests "inexplicable." Echoing de Blasio, he said that "the police are in an impossible situation." Talking out of the other side of his mouth, he said that "the people deserve answers and accountability." This was followed up by his appointment of James to investigate the police, a gesture aimed at mollifying the public.

Officers who violated NYPD policy during the protests will be punished, Shea told the hearing. But the commissioner then admitted that fewer than 10 policemen are facing disciplinary measures, despite widespread reports that officers kicked, shoved, pepper sprayed and cuffed protesters so tightly that it cut off their circulation. One of the few cases of discipline involved a cop who was caught on video violently shoving a 20-year-old woman to the ground and cursing at her during a protest near the Barclays Center in Brooklyn. The woman suffered a concussion. In this case, the officer was later suspended without pay and charged with assault and several other violations.

The May 29 and 30 incidents in Brooklyn are only two examples of police intimidation and violence against peaceful protesters. The WSWs provided a detailed first-person account of the police "kettling" a peaceful protest in the South Bronx on the night of June 4. The demonstrators, hemmed in by the police, faced mass arrests before the 8 p.m. curfew deadline had even passed. They were held overnight under abusive conditions.

Other instances of kettling, the use of pepper spray and mass arrests are documented in news reports and on a Wikipedia page on the George Floyd protests. As the

WSWS reported last week, 18 notices of police brutality in the recent protests have already been filed in New York. This is the only a small reflection of the nationwide campaign of that has seen massive, militarized police deployments against peaceful protests.

The problem of police violence is not a matter of a few rogue officers. A new generation of protesters, multi-racial and including many teenagers and students, are discovering what the working class has always known. While there is no shortage of racist police, their fundamental role is as the enforcer of capitalist law and order, the armed defenders of the status quo of poverty and exploitation.

The everyday brutality of the police, as well as their ability to act with impunity, was graphically illustrated in a recent report in *ProPublica*, the investigative news website. A reporter for *ProPublica* gave a detailed report of an incident his family witnessed eight months ago. When his wife and young child were trick-or-treating in Brooklyn last Halloween, they saw an unmarked police car speeding the wrong way on a one-way street. The car seemed to be chasing a few teenagers, and suddenly it hit one of them. The child slid over the length of the police car, hit the pavement, and then got up and ran away.

The cops then started bullying a group of younger children who had no apparent connection to the group of teenagers. Officers lined them up, shone lights in their eyes, and questioned them. They arrested and cuffed three of the children. When a mother who had witnessed the interrogation asked the boys for their phone numbers so she could notify their parents, a cop walked up to the woman and shouted her down.

The police drove the children to the station and failed to notify their parents as required. The parents nonetheless found out and came to the station, only to be refused entrance. After four hours, when it was almost 1 a.m., the children were allowed to leave. The parents received no paperwork and were not told the arresting officers' names. A spokesperson for the police denied that the police had hit a child with their car, contradicting the accounts of at least four witnesses.

The *ProPublica* account goes on to document the aftermath of this abuse.

New York's Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) announced that it would investigate the incident, but ultimately the NYPD controls these investigations, most of which are not completed.

The CCRB was created more than 60 years ago, and during its existence has done next to nothing to curb

police brutality. The CCRB's requests for body camera footage, for example, are often denied. Since the pandemic began, the NYPD has not allowed the CCRB to interview officers remotely, thus halting investigations into complaints. The CCRB is understaffed, and de Blasio recently cut its budget by 6 percent. The police commissioner can intervene in investigations at any time and has the final say over punishment. For the most serious cases, the NYPD has rejected the CCRB's recommended punishment approximately two-thirds of the time.

In 2018, the CCRB investigated approximately 3,000 alleged violations of policy on the use of force. It substantiated 73 of these cases, barely 2.5 percent. The most serious result where the police were found at fault was that nine officers lost vacation days.

Responding to public anger, de Blasio recently announced reforms such as posting NYPD discipline records online and mandating prompt investigations and the release of footage when alleged abuse causes serious injury or death. But none of de Blasio's moves affect the commissioner's complete authority over discipline.

More than six years ago the hated stop-and-frisk policy, used by the police to conduct hundreds of thousands of stops and searches of primarily African-American and Hispanic youth on a yearly basis, was ruled unconstitutional as carried out and its use has since sharply declined.

As the above events demonstrate, however, nothing was fundamentally changed by the stop-and-frisk ruling, and de Blasio's cosmetic reforms will deliver nothing as well. The role of the police is not susceptible to such measures. It is no more possible to eliminate police brutality than it is to eliminate poverty, inequality and war under the capitalist system. De Blasio, Cuomo and other big business politicians may occasionally pledge a new day in "police-community relations," but that is only to defend the interests of the ruling oligarchy. The police forces must be dismantled and transformed by bringing the working class to power and building a socialist society.

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