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NLG Joins Activists in Condemning Brutality and Intimidation by Akron Police

AKRON, OHIO – The National Lawyers Guild (NLG) honors the work of and stands in solidarity with the #JusticeforJayland movement in Akron, Ohio. In recent days, as peaceful protesters assembled, as is their constitutionally protected right to do, the State has waged an assault on the community. Police have deployed pepper spray and tear gas into crowds in residential areas without instigation and before issuing dispersal orders, using chemical agents classified as chemical weapons by the Geneva Convention, banned for use in war, and known to leave chemical burns on the skin. They have made predatory, pretextual stops without probable cause, and arrested drivers leaving protests. They have deployed LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device) machines against protesters, journalists, children, and elders, alike, which can permanently damage hearing.

The NLG joins local activists in calling for an end to anti-Black police violence and in demanding justice for Jayland Walker's loved ones. Specifically, the community demands the immediate firing of the eight officers involved in Jayland's murder, for their federal prosecution, and for local law enforcement to end its campaign of intimidation, violence, and malicious prosecution against Akron protesters.

The barbaric beating of Rodney King by the L.A. Police Department in 1991 shocked those ignorant to the issue, predominantly white Americans, that for many Black Americans, fear of police brutality was a daily reality. For the BIPOC community (that is Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), police violence has been a common historical thread from the early slave patrols and lynchings, systematic genocide of Indigenous populations, and the steady imperial exploitation of Mexico and its people. This legacy of state violence continues today at our borders, in our communities, and is reflected in all aspects of the carceral system.

Since the violent assault of Rodney King, our collective consciousness on the specific area of policing has developed along with cell phone technology which captures seemingly endless videos of police violence against the BIPOC community. This exposure has elevated our understanding that officers kill Black people at three times the rate of white people, with Black men at particular risk. This is especially disturbing given law enforcement's pattern of brutality and lethal force against suspects who are unarmed, restrained, or attempting to flee. Officers are required to have a reasonable fear of imminent threat of death or great bodily harm to justify using deadly force, yet it has become the standard, not the exception, for law enforcement to remain on the job without penalty when they violate procedure and severely injure or kill a person who does not pose a threat. Death should not, and is not, the penalty for asking questions, disobeying, walking away, resisting, or running in the opposite direction of law enforcement, and this depraved violence must end.

This was true with Jayland Walker, a 25-year-old Black man, from Akron, Ohio. This past Monday, April 17, 2023, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost delivered the Summit County Grand Jury decision not to indict the eight officers who, following a car pursuit and subsequent ten-second foot chase, fired 94 rounds at Jayland, some even reloading their weapons. Jayland was unarmed at the time of the shooting. Officers then callously handcuffed Jayland's body, which had been shot 46 times, many into his back as he fled. The eight officers returned to administrative duty shortly after the incident. Even after unintentionally releasing officers' names to the public, officials have not acknowledged the mistake or confirmed the names of the officers. Officials also released personal information of Jayland Walker's loved ones, and are attempting to keep the public in the dark about any potential histories of lethal or excessive force by these officers. This behavior by police demonstrates that law enforcement is more interested in protecting their own than the public.

We know this is not an isolated incident: George Floyd, Jacob Blake, Timothy Russell, Malissa Williams, and countless other non-threatening victims. Recently in Atlanta, Georgia, police murdered a non-violent, 26-year-old, Indigenous protester named Tortuguita who opposed the building of "Cop City," an 85-acre police training facility that threatens the local community and large portions of the Weelaunee Forest. As officers cleared an encampment of protesters, Tortuguita refused to exit their tent and was murdered when officers fired into the tent, striking them 57 times. Similar to Jayland, law enforcement claimed justifiable self-defense stating a weapon was fired from the tent, injuring one. However, it has since been confirmed that the shot came from another officer. Additionally, autopsy evidence revealed bullets entered both of Tortuguita's palms indicating their hands were raised and they were likely sitting crossed-legged inside their tent when killed.

The NLG is committed to the abolition of traditional policing structures which too often result in the death or injury of members of the BIPOC community, or serve as an entry point to the dehumanizing system of mass incarceration. We reject funding cop response models that use only the tools of command, force, and intimidation and support alternative, proven, community-driven crisis response models that provide care and serve justice. We reject policies that shield law enforcement from liability and accountability such as qualified immunity and non-public internal investigations. As we work toward our ultimate goal of abolition and transition toward community justice models, within our current carceral system, we support the advancement of progressive prosecutors committed to dismantling both the unconscious biases that exist within themselves and to dismantling the overt systemic racism that exists in all aspects of the criminal justice system, particularly the jury selection process and Grand Jury indictments.

For over 80 years the NLG has acted as the legal arm of social movements and we commit our support to the Akron community movement today. Organized during the Civil Rights movement, NLG lawyers, law students, and legal workers have observed police actions during protests, provided *Know Your Rights* training, tracked arrestees through the legal system, and worked to find free legal assistance for protest-related cases as part of our Mass Defense Program. We will continue to protect the right to dissent across the nation and stand firmly in solidarity with those affected by police brutality.

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