

Albuquerque police account of latest deadly shooting reinforces suspicions

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At a May 6 press briefing, the Albuquerque Police Department (APD) presented its account of its most recent deadly shooting, that of 50-year-old Armand Martin, who died of a single shot in the chest on the front steps of his house in the city's northwest quadrant.

The account by APD Deputy Chief Eric Garcia repeated statements made earlier by APD. It included an audio recording of the early afternoon call to the APD by Martin's wife, Gail Martin, in which she told the officer that Martin had pulled a gun and threatened her and her two children. Garcia also mentioned a cellphone video taken by one of the children showing Martin stepping out of a bedroom with a pistol.

"A patrol officer arrived along with two sergeants and including one sergeant who was a CIT [Crisis Intervention Team] certified sergeant," who met with Ms. Martin and the two children and then went to the Martin home, where Martin "refused to cooperate with the officers' request to exit the residence and speak with them." SWAT, which Garcia said included crisis negotiators, a crisis negotiator supervisor and a department psychologist, was then called in. "For their safety, residents in neighboring homes were advised through public announcements to shelter in place by moving to the rear of their residence."

Garcia mentioned Martin's history of mental health problems, including suicide attempts and threats. "A department psychologist attempted to get information from the VA [Veterans Affairs], who confirmed the mental health history, but the hospital refused to provide any additional information about the suspect's mental health history.

"As negotiators continued ongoing efforts to reach a peaceful resolution for hours, the suspect refused to continue in dialogue with negotiators. Rather than

engage with the negotiators, he began calling local news media and family members." APD told the media not to respond to Martin's calls. "At approx. 5:36 p.m., the suspect positioned himself on the second floor of the home, and multiple gunshots were fired from within the residence at officers and surrounding homes. Officers indicated they could hear at least one gunshot pass over their heads."

A screen behind Garcia showed pictures of the first and second floors of the home, where he said several bullet casings had been found.

Officers shot tear gas through second-story windows "in an attempt to move the suspect from the second story and prevent further shooting by the suspect," Garcia said. "Officers did not return any fire from this volley of gunshots from the suspect. Officers continued to hear gunshots from within the residence. At approx. 6:20 p.m., the suspect exited through the front door, actively shooting with two handguns. One APD officer discharged his department-issued rifle, firing a single shot. The suspect was pronounced deceased on scene." The screen showed photos of the handguns.

Later, in response to a question regarding lapel cameras, Garcia said that the APD anticipated producing a lapel video "sometime in the middle of the day." The videos, totaling all of 45 seconds, only show footage of the officers approaching, turning over and handcuffing Martin's lifeless body. Two handguns, a digitally obscured spot of blood and cellphone are seen on the ground.

The videos show nothing of the moments leading up to Martin's shooting, or of the shooting itself. The APD sent an email on May 7 to news outlet KOB admitting, "Lapel videos are still being reviewed, but no lapel camera videos have been found to capture footage of the actual shooting thus far."

The APD had several explanations as to why a five-hour standoff involving several officers—almost all with lapel cameras—could not produce a video verifying the official account: officers needed to conserve their lapel cameras' batteries, so they turned them off and on during the standoff; they were too far away; they had taken cover behind armored vehicles; their body cameras were not pointed at the front of the house when Martin emerged.

This is reminiscent of the previous case of 19-year-old Mary Hawkes, in which no video cam footage of her fatal shooting was produced. As for officer Daniel Hughes, the SWAT member who fired the shot that killed Armand Martin, the APD told the station that he “was acting as a cover officer when he shot Martin and was not required to wear a helmet in that capacity.”

Even before this admission, doubts had emerged about APD's purported attempts to defuse the standoff with Armand Martin. In an interview, Christy Tackwell, a counselor with experience with mentally ill veterans, told KOB, “Definitely during a SWAT situation where there are many techniques used such as rushing and tear gas and so forth, that is going to put anybody into a heightened sense of fight or flight.” APD used some of these tactics to “de-escalate” the standoff.

David Correia, an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, called the lack of video footage “predictable” and “precisely what the Department of Justice report says on pages 35 and 36 that in particular SWAT at APD almost routinely fails to capture video of all of their engagements,” referring to the April DOJ report regarding excessive APD violence.

Correia was at an Albuquerque city council meeting on May 5, in which he and some other protesters, including loved ones of officer-involved shooting victims, attempted to serve a dummy “arrest warrant” on APD chief Gorden Eden and called for his and mayor Richard Berry's sacking. The council members left for a “break” during which the protesters occupied their seats, denounced the council's “inaction” and urged the council to “Quit sitting on your hands!”

The councilors canceled the meeting and rescheduled it for May 8, to take up for discussion the same issue as that planned for the canceled meeting: the police chief selection process. Presently the city's police chief is

chosen by the mayor. The two proposals are a direct citizens' vote and approval by the city council of the mayor's choice. Whatever the outcome of the vote, it will do nothing but provide pseudo-democratic window dressing without bringing fundamental changes to APD policy.

At the rescheduled meeting, the city council took no chances. With extra security on hand, the councilors restricted remarks to two minutes and limited them to the police chief selection process. Seven of the people who took the podium did not speak in protest. Police took them out of the chambers, citing five for criminal trespassing and banning them from city hall for 90 days. The first “speaker” projected a message protesting the restrictions on his free speech rights before being taken out. Speakers generally supported a citizen vote, and some called for firing Eden and Berry. One protester later told reporters, “We made a point Monday night that the people are in charge and it's going to take the people in this community to fix the problem we have here.”

As the WSWS has stated before, the ramping up of police violence is not unique to Albuquerque. Police killings are occurring regularly all over the United States, as the deadly April 27 shooting of an unarmed fleeing suspect by Long Beach, California police caught on video shows. Nor is it the outcome of evil individuals, hiring, administrative or oversight shortcomings, or the APD “culture.”

The US ruling class is well aware of the seething anger among the working class population over its policies of austerity, inequality and imperialist war and is prepared for inevitable resistance. It has given the green light—as well as increased funding and equipment—to police departments nationwide to escalate their attacks on the working class to preemptively instill fear of retaliation for that resistance.



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