

# Five New York City Rikers Island prison guards found guilty in beating

Sandy English  
10 June 2016

On Tuesday five prison guards who ordered or participated in the merciless July 2012 beating of inmate Jahmal Lightfoot at the Rikers Island jail complex in New York City were convicted of the crime.

A Bronx jury found Eliseo Perez Jr., Tobias Parker, Jose Parra, Alfred Rivera and David Rodriguez guilty of attempted gang assault, which carries a sentence of 15 years, as well as attempted assault in the first degree, assault in the second degree and crimes committed in the subsequent attempt to cover up the beating, including falsifying business records and official misconduct.

Perez was an assistant chief of security at the facility and is one of the highest-ranking prison guards ever to be found guilty of crimes of this nature. One guard was acquitted and three others, including a captain, opted out of a jury decision. A judge is expected to rule shortly on their cases.

Lightfoot allegedly stared at Perez during a weapons screening. Perez then ordered five guards, part of a special unit, to beat him. Prosecutors argued that the real motive for the assault was that prison authorities wanted to “set a tone” after another inmate had been stabbed in a separate incident earlier the same day.

Prison guards placed Lightfoot in a cell without video surveillance and hidden behind drapery. Five guards then beat him while three others kept watch. In his testimony Lightfoot related how he tried to cover his face with his hands during the beating and that guards kicked him in the groin and pinned down his arms and legs. The guards broke both of Lightfoot’s eye sockets and his nose. His eyes were swollen shut because of his injuries and he coughed up blood for days after the sadistic treatment. To cover their tracks, guards accused Lightfoot of possessing a weapon and he was placed in

solitary confinement for 110 days.

Rikers Island, the largest prison facility in the US, has long been a cesspool of violence and corruption. It is a holding institution for those awaiting trial, many of whom cannot afford bail, and also a dumping ground for the psychologically damaged. In other words, some of the most vulnerable members of New York City’s population are warehoused and routinely brutalized there.

A 2014 *New York Times* exposé of the prison’s juvenile wing and a report by the US Attorney’s Office of the Southern District of New York noted a “culture of violence” at the prison in which “force is used as punishment or retribution.” Since then a seemingly endless series of exposés has highlighted various aspects of the state-sanctioned criminality, from a corrupt and inefficient private health care provider to the smuggling of weapons and drugs by guards.

Last year the US Attorney indicted three guards for the beating death of Ronald Spear in 2012. In another infamous case, on February 15, 2014 a homeless veteran, Jerome Murdough, died in an overheated cell because of neglect from guards.

The systematic brutality at Rikers is an important component of the effort to intimidate and terrorize the working class and poor in New York, in the face of unprecedented social inequality and widespread misery. Other measures include the sweeping violation of democratic rights in the New York Police Department’s stop-and-frisk program and the murder of innocent and unarmed people, such as Eric Garner, whose strangulation by an NYPD officer was caught on video in July 2014.

The refusal of a grand jury to indict Garner’s killer provoked mass protests. The failure to hand out prison time to the cop who “accidentally” shot Akai Gurley in

a Brooklyn housing project in November 2014 has confirmed the widespread view that the police act with complete impunity. The lawlessness of the detention system in the biggest American city has further contributed to the sentiment held by wide layers of working class New Yorkers that they live in an authoritarian state that operates on behalf of the city's financial oligarchy.

The devastating exposure of the brutality and corruption at Rikers Island has made New York's elite nervous. The *New York Times* and elements of the city's Democratic Party establishment—desperate to maintain the illusion that they represent “ordinary people”—have called for the closing of the facility, without proposing, however, any alternative system that would guarantee the safety of inmates. Notably, the city's “progressive” Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, has opposed closing Rikers as an unrealistic proposal.

The new Bronx County District Attorney, Darcel D. Clark, whose area of authority includes Rikers Island, has pledged to play a leading role “addressing the very real challenges there.” She has appointed a team of 30 assistant DAs to investigate crimes on the island. Some of them will staff a permanent office on the island.

In a related story, the president of the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association, Norman Seabrook, was arrested on Wednesday on charges of fraud. Seabrook, who called Tuesday's conviction of the five sadist-guards “another example of how Correction Officers are treated differently and disrespected,” has long shielded guards from investigation and prosecution. During a trial of two guards on brutality charges (who were later acquitted by a judge), for example, he saw to it that 44 Department of Correction buses that ferry defendants from Rikers to court appearances were significantly delayed, thereby denying prisoners their right to a speedy trial.

The character of the charges against Seabrook are telling. He has been charged with receiving \$60,000 in kickbacks from hedge fund manager Murray Huberfeld, who was also arrested, for sinking \$20 million of the union's retirement funds in high-risk investments.

Seabrook, according to the *New York Times*, “favors finely tailored suits and cigars and is chauffeured around the city in black S.U.V.s.” He allegedly received his payoff in a paper bag from a favorite luxury shoe store, Ferragamo.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**