

Los Angeles Protests Against Police Killing Reveal the Real Grassroots

Kamran Afary and Kevin Anderson

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Los Angeles, CA — Protestors demonstrated on the streets and clashed with police after the September 5 police killing – in broad daylight – of Manuel Jamines, a day laborer. Tragically, Jamines, a Guatemalan immigrant originally from an indigenous community, was fluent in neither English nor Spanish. Thus, he may not have understood the 3 bicycle police from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) who confronted him that afternoon.

Why Lethal Force?

Community members from the Westlake neighborhood, which is heavily populated by Central American immigrants, demanded to know why lethal force had been used on a drunken and staggering man who – according to police – came toward them while waving a small knife at 3 police carrying firearms.

Moreover, a local witness denied that Jamines was armed: “A Westlake resident who said she witnessed the LAPD’s fatal shooting of a Guatemalan day laborer said Thursday she saw no knife in the man’s hands, contradicting the Police Department’s account. ‘He had nothing in his hands,’ said Ana, who did not give her last name and asked that her face be obscured on photos and on television because she feared being harassed by the police. ‘At the moment when the police were shooting, he had nothing.’She said the man appeared drunk, and was having trouble keeping his balance. He stepped toward the officers, but it appeared to be an attempt to keep from falling forward, she said. Ana said she gestured to the man from across the street, trying to get him to turn around and let police arrest him.”

“Ana, who works in a school cafeteria, said she has lived in the neighborhood for 30 years and believes that police have been over-aggressively cracking down on street vendors and seizing their products.” (Victoria Kim, “[Victim of LAPD’s fatal shooting in Westlake was unarmed, witness says](#),” *LA Times*, 9/10/10)

Ana’s point about the crackdown on street vendors illustrated some of the underlying class and ethnic tensions in a community that has experienced poverty, racism, and police brutality for decades.

Challenging the LAPD

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Beginning on the night of September 6, and for several nights afterwards, hundreds of demonstrators massed outside a branch station of the Rampart Division of the LAPD. On the evening of September 7, some 300 protestors gathered outside the station, where they clashed with police. Police thereupon declared an unlawful assembly, and arrested 22 people.

On the evening of September 8, a meeting was scheduled by the authorities, where LAPD Chief Charlie Beck was to speak to the community. Before the meeting began, young protestors skirmished with police in riot gear, also dumping trash on the streets to block police vehicles. Some demonstrators shouted “pigs” at police, who threatened them with rifles.

Even to get inside the meeting, which was held at a local school, community residents had to pass through an intimidating phalanx of riot police who searched and checked them for weapons. KPCC Radio (National Public Radio) reporter Shirley Jahad likened this to “a militarized force” that created severe obstacles to attending the meeting. No signs or banners were allowed inside. Despite this atmosphere of intimidation, 300 very angry people made their way inside.

At the meeting, Beck was roundly booed and heckled as he tried to justify the shooting. Some shouted, “Killers! Assassins!” at police. According to Jahad, police displayed an enlarged photo of the knife in order to exaggerate the threat Jamines posed before they killed him. Beck admitted openly that the LAPD has no policy of disarming someone with a knife; nor does it have a policy of shooting to wound rather than to kill. He also admitted that bicycle officers do not have non-lethal weapons like teargas – too heavy to carry, he said.

Community speakers demanded a thorough investigation, but expressed doubts that this would occur. “Transparency for us means members of the community should be part of the investigation as well,” said Juan Acano, a Westlake community worker. “The community spoke tonight. There are many that want to be part of the process, not just me,” as reported in Neon Tommy, a progressive news outlet at University of Southern California.

The Real Grassroots

The location of this latest police killing offered a dramatic illustration of the class/race chasm dividing US society: It took place at the corner of 6th Street and Union Ave., just across the 110 Freeway from the shimmering high-rise office buildings of downtown LA.

Westlake is a center of Central American immigrants, many of them Salvadoran and Guatemalan. The community has a long history of struggles against police crackdowns on street vendors, which have intensified this summer, especially on nearby Alvarado Street. This has stoked tensions at a time when unemployment levels in minority communities like Westlake stand at catastrophic levels. Overall, the official unemployment rate in Los Angeles County stood at 12.3% in June 2010, three times what it was in 2006-07, before the Great Recession. And it is probably more than 25% in communities like Westlake.

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The police killing in Westlake is a continuation of decades of subjugation at the hands of police and power structure that they represent. MacArthur Park, only 5 blocks from the September 5 killing, is where the LAPD brutally attacked thousands of immigrant rights demonstrators on May 1, 2007.

Westlake is also part of the notorious Rampart Division of the LAPD, where in the 1990s police from an anti-gang unit assassinated unarmed gang members and engaged in other criminal acts. This resulted in the Rampart scandal, during which some 70 police officers were implicated in various forms of misconduct toward civilians.

Earlier, during the 1992 LA Rebellion, dozens of buildings were burned and stores looted in Westlake and its environs.

Above all, the Westlake police killings and resultant community response illuminate the lived situation and the thinking of one of the most oppressed layers of the population, part of a group that is undergoing untold suffering during the Great Recession. This, and not the middle class anti-tax protestors who have gained so much media attention, is the real grassroots of US society, which its dominant classes ignore at their peril.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/los-angeles-protests-against-police-killing-reveal-the-real-grassroots-by-kamran-afary-and-kevin-anderson/>