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Police Threaten at Peaceful Protest

Contributed by:

Corey Reidy[1]

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On June 21, 2011, a small group of activists gathered at the Battle Monument in downtown Baltimore. They were there to protest the [Shomrim case](#) [2]. While there, exercising their “constitutional rights”, a group of observers were verbally affronted and threatened by a police officer.

THE PROTEST

According to *Indyreader* correspondent Mark Gunnery:

The Shomrim, or the Watchers, is an Orthodox Jewish citizen patrol group active in the northwest, serving the area north of Northern Parkway, as well as Pikesville and Greenspring, in Baltimore County. They were formed in 2005, in response to burglaries in the area. They have acted as a first-response team since, operating an around-the-clock phone line and often arriving at crime scenes before the police. They have no special rights beyond those of civilians, and cannot attack or detain people.(Shomrim, An Attack, and An Emergency Protest)[2]

However, according to a police report, on November 19,2010 - Eli and Avi Werdesheim, of The

Shomrim, attacked a fifteen-year old African American Northwestern High School student as he was walking along Fallstaff Road. The Werdesheim's broke the teen's hand in the assault. There are no signs that the teen provoked his attackers.

In January, felony charges were dropped, to be replaced by three counts of misdemeanours: second-degree assault, possession of a deadly weapon, and false imprisonment.

The Werdesheim's trial was scheduled to begin on May 2nd. As the trial date approached, it was quickly rescheduled to Tuesday, July 12th - at the request of Werdesheim's lawyers for further preparation time.

As the trial moves further and further away from the incident's outbreak, a group of citizen's and a variety of organizations: May Second Movement, All Peoples Congress; A.N.S.W.E.R Coalition; Baltimore Black Think Tank; Baltimore Chapter of SCLC; International Socialist Organization; Jamaat Al-Muslimeen International; Leo Burroughs; and Ujima Peoples Progress Party -have been organizing a series of actions to keep the case in the public's eye.

They believe that the the trial is continously rescheduled in order to minimize the community's reaction against the attackers. A commonly employed strategy, in highly-debated cases, is that it is easier for defendants to win when confronted with less public outcry.

The protest organizers also point-out that Shomrim and their supporters have literally bused people into the city, from three different states, to enable the appearance of steadfast community solidarity, largely and favorably behind the Werdesheims.

“How do we compete with that? Well, if we don't get the momentum building,” states one protestor, “if we don't keep this trial in the public's memory, it will be forgotten. We need to have people protesting up 'til the trial date and a mass turn-out on July 12th. They already dropped the felony charges against Eli Werdesheim, and that was during a time when this attack was getting tons of publicity. We can't let people forget.”

If convicted, Werdesheim faces a maximum of ten years in prison.

Reverend C.D. Witherspoon, a local activist and one of the key players in keeping action around the Shomrim case unfolding, states, “We need to remind people. But we also need to inform people. Action can't just be about getting people's attention. It has to be about letting them know. This case is getting painted as a strictly race issue. Jewish Baltimore against Black Baltimore. And it's important to talk about that. But, it isn't just that. It's also class. There are two different classes in Park Heights, that aren't just neatly cut along race lines. There's the upper class. And then

there's the lower class. It is a racial issue. But it's not just. It's also an economic issue. Justice is universal. The upper class having power and control over the lower class... and different hatreds from that. All issues are interconnected and you have to examine all of them. Justice is universal. We can't let people just look at one-side. It makes decisions too easy. We have to look at all sides.”

Reverend C.D. Witherspoon states that he and his family have been receiving numerous hate calls/emails and his own police report and credit report have appeared on national websites since he began protesting the case.

“We are unphased. We are unmoved, “ began Rev. Witherspoon in response to the threats, “We answer to a higher power called Justice. We are here today. And we will be here again. Nothing will deter us from destroying corruption and injustice.”

The Police Threaten Observer

“You can play if you want, but it's real hot down in Central Booking.” - Baltimore City Police Department

Reverend Witherspoon isn't the only one receiving threats due to action.

Paula Hollie, a public school teacher from Philadelphia, stopped to watch the protest as she was making her way back from viewing a hearing at City Hall, in which local restaurant, Terra Cafe, would continue to be allowed live entertainment. (There is actually immense scandal around Terra Cafe's situation. We ask you to stay-tuned for *Indyreader's* coming story on the situation.)

As previously mentioned, the action took place at the Battle Monument. The monument is set dead center in Calvert Street, with the road splitting and re-converging around the statue.

As a public space, where protestors are lawfully granted to gather - the ratio of police-to-protestors was vastly outnumbered since the action's onset. A number of organizers remarked, that as they drove to the monument, around a quarter to three, a line of patrol cars set-off behind them, following them to the space. As they began to demonstrate, the police stood across the street. They leaned on their cars and made loud taunting jeers in the demonstrators' direction.

They were said to shout, “If you stand in the crosswalk, there will be trouble.”

Crosswalk: Meaning, an unmarked space, decked in cobblestones, circling the monument.

The demonstration itself was small, an upward of ten folks - at most - turned out.

As the “crosswalk” is unmarked, passers-by do not appear to use it as such.

Paula and her two friends stopped to watch the demonstration on their way back from Terra Cafe's hearing.

They stood accidentally in the “crosswalk”.

What happened next is from Paula's and other demonstrator's perspectives. When *Indyreader* approached the stationed police for their take, they quickly stated, “No comment.”

It appears that as Paula and her friends watched the demonstration, one of the police officers came over and forcefully said, “Step back. You're in the way of people trying to cross the street.”

Confused, as Paula had not yet learned that where she was standing had been deemed a “crosswalk”, she asked, “What do you mean? What people?”

The police said, “Move.”

So, she moved to her right.

“Can I stand here?” she asked.

The officer is reported to have gotten visibly upset at this question.

She moved to another space.

“Can I stand here?”

It appears, that the office then marched up to Paula and barked, "You can play if you want. But it's real hot down in Central Booking."

At this, one of Paula's friends came up and contended that the police couldn't arrest her "simply for exercising her right to be" – that all she had been doing was standing.

The police turned to Paula's friend and threatened, "I'll arrest you,too."

Reverend Witherspoon and the other demonstrators then came over to defend the onlookers. Rev.Witherspoon cried, "Hey, you can't arrest her simply for standing. If you're itching for someone to arrest- arrest me."

Later, Rev.Witherspoon remarked that he knew, that if he had been arrested, there would be immediate public outcry from his community.

It isn't apparent why the police officer eventually returned to his station, without making any arrests. Yet, he eventually did.

Since his retreat and until the demonstrators dispersed, the surrounding officers continued to stand, laugh, and jeer at the protestors.

"They think this is a frat-kid game: who can be the coolest by the being the biggest bully," stated one demonstrator.

Paula Hollie commented, "I'm amazed but I'm also not surprised. It's dangerous and detrimental to have that much power. I wasn't fighting, I was simply stopping to watch a peaceful demonstration. I wanted to see what was going on.... they [the police] act like they're all high and mighty and superior to us. But, they forget they work for us. I pay their salaries... but, they just want us to be too scared to be free."

Reverend Witherspoon says that he plans to find out who all of the officers are, find out if they were at their proper posts, and contact their superiors to inform them of the incident.

Nicholas Powell, a young and respected activist of A.N.S.W.E.R Coalition fame, stated that the police wanted to intimidate them [the protestors]. The police wanted to frighten passers-by from supporting the demonstration. Powell continued to attest that, the harassed onlookers didn't do anything to mobilize the police threats. They were simply standing peacefully.

"This is regular police brutality; verbal harassment and unnecessary threats. You demonstrate, you expect it. And you shouldn't," said Powell.

Paula remarked, "They want to create a police-state-aura of fear. It's their way to oppress those who peacefully demand justice. It's ridiculous. These folks [the demonstrators] are strategizing for life. Not for destruction."

The Trial

The Shomrim Trial is set for July 12th. Organizers plan to keep momentum building. On the day of

the trial, they are planning another demonstration. Stay tuned to *Indyreader* for those forthcoming details.

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