



Summary of the Testimony and Commentary at the People's Tribunal on Police Brutality

This Summary of the Testimony at the People's Tribunal on Police Brutality serves as a searing indictment of the "criminal justice" system in Cleveland, Ohio. An earlier draft of this summary was delivered to the office of the Mayor of the City of Cleveland on April 14, the National Shut Down Day that was called for by the Stop Mass Incarceration Network. On that day, people across the country took to the streets to say "NO MORE!" to giving a green light to killer cops.

The People's Tribunal on Police Brutality was held on Saturday, April 11 in Cleveland, Ohio. Organized by the local activist group Puncture the Silence-Stop Mass Incarceration, the tribunal gave voice to courageous testifiers who refused to remain silent about their harrowing experiences with law enforcement officers and prison guards. These stories reveal the tip of the iceberg of the kind of outrageous treatment the people of Cleveland, particularly people of color, endure on a daily basis. The stories, which depict officers who feel justified in perpetrating crimes ranging everywhere from harassment and intimidation to torture and murder, lead inescapably to the conclusion that Cleveland's police force is a diseased entity infected by a culture of impunity. Meanwhile, we see the psychological damage that continues to be inflicted on the members of the Cleveland communities terrorized by the police.

Revisiting their traumatic encounters with Cleveland's system of law enforcement was highly emotional for the testifiers. Family members of people whose lives had been stolen delivered wrenching testimony. The father of 18-year old unarmed Brandon Jones, killed by police in Cleveland on March 19 after allegedly stealing a pack of cigarettes and some coins from a corner store, said through his anguish, "He shouldn't have stolen, but he wasn't bad... If all Black kids are bad, all cops are bad. My life will never be the same. I hurt. I hurt for my wife; I hurt for my kids." He told how the woman who called 911 was so remorseful that she regretted calling the police, saying that if she knew they were going to kill his son, she would have let him get away.

A black activist from the Stolen Lives Project said his sister should be here, instead of having been murdered in 1989. Stories of brutality and resistance ranged from the early seventies to this year. All agreed that to finally put an end to these atrocities, these stories must be amplified and resistance must be intensified.

Other family members told of a sister, a brother, and two more sons (one Black, one white) being killed by Cleveland police. A black woman who lost her son in 2007 said, "It's getting worse. You can't heal because of the pain when the killings are going on and on... I have to put on a disguise. When your child has been taken away, you can't watch the same things, eat the same things, cook the same things."

Other testifiers told of playing dead to get vicious beatings to stop, sustaining serious permanent physical damage, being menaced by armed threats, dealing with false allegations and charges, uncalled-for arrests, trials, jail-time, hospitalization, ongoing surgeries, PTSD, juveniles and low-level convicts put in prison with violent adult criminals, corruption, starvation, and torture. It was clear that those with mental problems get even worse treatment at the hands of the police. Testifiers expressed thanks, sometimes tearfully, for the opportunity to share their stories and their pain. Panelists and testifiers agreed that the telling of these stories was an empowering act, and that in order to heal these wounds and to resist persistent police terror, these stories must continue to be told and the protest movement must continue to grow. Some said that marching is beautiful, but we need some new solutions.

The panel that received the testimony was a powerhouse of people of conscience comprised of: Dr. Ed McKinney, Social Work Professor Emeritus, Cleveland State University; Writer/activist Rev. Leah Lewis; Shemariah Arki of Excellence Management Group; Cephus "Uncle Bobby" Johnson, Uncle of Oscar Grant; Edward Little, Public Policy Consultant and one of the Cleveland 8 working for Justice for Tamir Rice; Bill Swain, *Revolution* newspaper; and Genevieve Mitchell, Director of The Black Women's Center. As they listened to often excruciating detail of police assaults and murder, they offered support to help the victims cope with their pain, saying "We're here to lift you up." They expressed militancy in calling for resistance, participation in the "Shut Down" actions on April 14, the need for all to say, "No more!" and for the need to give voice to the unheard stories of those who have been killed. They stated that we are in a state of emergency and the time for action is now, if we are going to stop police murder.

One panelist stated he had been hearing similar stories for eighty years, and he didn't want the toddler in the audience to have this in her future. He and others called on those present to take things to another level, perhaps with higher risks. The young people present were called upon to become leaders in the movement for justice. One panelist made a plea to young people to win this struggle once and for all, "I'm sitting here fighting the same fight that my Dad was fighting. Do I want my children to fight the same fight?" Another panelist told young testifiers that, "It's critical that we hear your story, because you are the movement."

Panelists commented on the role of politicians, the media, the economy, mass incarceration, and confronting our history. "We need to get the truth out; these people are being brutalized and we do not know about it. The media is not telling the truth; the people are afraid to talk," said one. Another emphasized that "we have to educate [our children] on a few different things. We have to educate them on the system. We have to educate them on our history about who we are... We have to educate them on the capitalistic nature of American culture... The generation that came before them shielded them so much till they don't know... their history."

A panelist who had been incarcerated said that injustices are even worse behind bars. "If we are really serious about uncovering injustice and ending mass incarceration and standing up for right, we have to put a microscope on America's prisons. Because if you think the atrocities we see out here on these streets are bad, what they do behind prison walls where there are no cameras, where there are no witnesses, where everybody in there is considered to be, not to have credibility, you can not even imagine the atrocities that take place behind prison walls."

Panelists thanked the testifiers and Puncture the Silence for making the Tribunal happen, and suggested that more tribunals might be necessary. Panelists emphasized the importance of the testimonies and the courage of the testifiers to the movement to end police brutality. Said one panelist, "I'm proud of you for standing up and making your testimony and your stories known."