

50 Police Officers Step Down From a Crowd Control Unit in Portland

The officers voted to leave the unit, known as the Rapid Response Team, hours after one of its members was charged with assaulting a woman at an Oregon protest in August.



Police officers in Portland, Ore., during a protest in August. Credit...David Ryder for The New York Times

A group of about 50 police officers who had served voluntarily on a specialized crowd control unit in Portland, Ore., have stepped down from the squad after a year of sometimes violent clashes with protesters, the city's Police Department said on Thursday.

The resignations came just hours after a member of the unit, Officer Corey Budworth, was indicted on a misdemeanor assault charge that he physically injured an independent photojournalist during a protest in August.

Video of the episode shows an officer using his baton to shove a woman to the

ground and then pushing the baton in her face as a voice declares in what sounds like an official announcement: "Officers are taking lawful action. Stay on the sidewalk."

The officers' union has denounced the indictment, calling it a "politically driven charging decision" against an officer who "worked to restore order during a chaotic night of burning and destruction in Portland." Efforts to reach Officer Budworth's lawyer on Thursday were not immediately successful.

On Wednesday night, just hours after the Multnomah County district attorney announced the indictment, the roughly 50 colleagues who had served with Officer Budworth on the unit voted to leave the squad, known as the Rapid Response Team, Deputy Chief Chris Davis said on Thursday. He said the officers would remain on regular patrol and could still be deployed to respond to protests.

The officers, he said, had complained not only about the indictment, but about what they viewed as a broader lack of support after more than 150 nights of sustained protests, fueled in part by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.

"If you put a human being through what they were put through, that takes a toll," Chief Davis said. "They're not feeling like that sacrifice that they have made, necessarily, has been understood very well, and that's their perspective, and I have to honor their perspective."

Mayor Ted Wheeler said on Thursday that he had heard from officers who had resigned from the Rapid Response Team. "I want to acknowledge the toll this past year has taken on them and their families," he said in a statement. "They have worked long hours under difficult conditions."

In the team's absence, he said, he had directed the police to prepare mobile forces to respond to public safety needs, including potential violence at mass gatherings. He said he had also spoken to Gov. Kate Brown and that the Oregon State Police had made its Mobile Response Team available on standby.

The mass resignation is similar to an episode in June 2020, when all 57 officers on the Buffalo Police Department's Emergency Response Team, a special unit formed to respond to riots, resigned from the team in support of two team members who had been suspended after they were captured on video shoving a 75-year-old

protester to the ground.

In February, a grand jury declined to indict the two officers who had been facing felony assault charges for shoving the man, Martin Gugino, who had sustained a serious head injury.

The Portland Police Association, the officers' union, did not immediately respond on Thursday to a request for comment about the resignations from the Rapid Response Team.

But lawyers for Teri Jacobs, the independent photojournalist who was named as the victim in the indictment against Officer Budworth, said the resignations from the team demonstrate "the contempt its members feel for even the possibility that one of their colleagues is held accountable for his actions."

"Portland Police officers need to understand that they are not above the law nor are their actions exempt from the protections the Constitution aims to provide to people against exactly these types of abuse by police," the lawyers, Juan Chavez and Franz Bruggemeier, said in a statement.

"The refusal to acknowledge and address this wrongdoing goes to the heart of what's wrong with Portland Police," they said. "The failure of our city's elected leaders to step in is an indictment of their role in this mess and their complicity in the violence and trauma committed" by the Portland Police Bureau.

In October, the president of the Portland Police Association, Daryl Turner, had called on Mr. Wheeler and the city's police chief, Chuck Lovell, to publicly support the members of the Rapid Response Team who he said were "exhausted and injured" and had been used as "political pawns."

The Rapid Response Team members "do not volunteer to have Molotov cocktails, fireworks, explosives, rocks, bottles, urine, feces and other dangerous objects thrown at them," Mr. Turner wrote in a letter. "Nor do they volunteer to have threats of rape, murder, and assaults on their families hurled at them."

Mr. Turner said the officers had been caught between what he described as conflicting demands to "stand down" and to use force only when protests spun out of control.

"These officers find themselves in a no-win situation," Mr. Turner wrote. "They

can't win because of the position others have put them in."

The Portland Police have also been criticized for using excessive force against protesters.

The city's police officers used force more than 6,000 times over a six-month period from May 2020 to November 2020, according to lawyers with the Department of Justice, which reviewed officers' actions as part of a previous settlement agreement. The review found that the force sometimes deviated from policy; one officer justified firing a "less-lethal impact munition" at someone who had engaged in "furtive conversation" and then ran away.

The report recommended that the city implement additional crowd-control training for both the Rapid Response Team and another specialized squad, the Mobile Field Force.

In November, a city report found that a majority of Portland's police officers had "not received any recent skills training in crowd management, de-escalation, procedural justice, crisis intervention, or other critical skills for preventing or minimizing the use of force."

The charges against Officer Budworth stemmed from a protest outside the Multnomah Building in Portland on Aug. 18, Multnomah County District Attorney Mike Schmidt said.

In a federal lawsuit filed against the city in September, Ms. Jacobs said an officer — whom she identified only as "Officer 37" because of the number that he wore on his helmet — had chased her as she tried to walk away and then hit and shoved her in her back with his baton, knocking her to the ground.

He then waited while Ms. Jacobs gathered her senses and "bashed her in the face with his baton," according to the lawsuit.

"In this case, we allege that no legal justification existed for Officer Budworth's deployment of force, and that the deployment of force was legally excessive under the circumstances," Mr. Schmidt said in a statement.

The Portland Police Association defended Officer Budworth's actions, calling him a "decorated public servant" who had been "caught in the crossfire of agenda-driven city leaders and a politicized criminal justice system."

Source:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/17/us/portland-police-resign-protesters.html>

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