

St. Louis probe into police handling of protests must take press freedom into account

October 24, 2017 6:08 PM ET

Honorable Lyda Krewson
Mayor for the City of St. Louis
St. Louis City Hall - Room 200
1200 Market Street
St. Louis, Missouri 63103
Via email: krewsonl@stlouis-mo.gov

October 24, 2017

Dear Mayor Lyda Krewson,

We at the Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent press freedom advocacy group, along with the organizations listed below, write to express our concern about police conduct towards reporters covering protests in St. Louis in recent weeks.

We were pleased to see that you [pledged](#) a full and fair investigation into civilian complaints about police conduct during the protests, which erupted in mid-September over the acquittal of a former St. Louis police officer who shot a black man. We applaud your calls for an independent investigation by the [U.S. Attorney's Office](#). As you coordinate this investigation with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department and the Civilian Oversight Board, we urge you to include a thorough consideration of the impact of law enforcement actions on freedom of the press.

At least 10 journalists have been arrested while covering the protests, according to the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#), a database of press freedom incidents in the United States created with the support of 30 free expression and media organizations. Journalists have reported to the tracker that they were pepper-sprayed, cursed at, mocked, and treated with excessive force by police. Journalists who identified themselves and showed press credentials were arrested nonetheless.

Police arrested [Jon Ziegler](#), an independent livestreamer, on two occasions. On September 17, police officers pepper-sprayed him in the face and pushed his head to the ground before arresting

him, Ziegler told press freedom groups. He also alleged that police mocked his video reporting, calling him a "superstar." Ziegler was arrested again on October 3.

At least four other journalists--independent documentary filmmakers [Drew Burbridge](#) and [Jennifer Burbridge](#), St. Louis Dispatch reporter [Mike Faulk](#), and Getty Images photographer [Scott Olson](#)--were arrested and taken into custody on September 17. At least five journalists--[Ty Bayliss](#) and [Jordan Chariton](#) of The Young Turks, [Al Neal](#) from People's World, and independent journalists [Aminah Ali](#) and [Daniel Shular](#)--were arrested on October 3. Shular was detained for 18 hours even though he displayed accreditation, did not hear an order to disperse, and was never told he was under arrest or read a Miranda warning, according to his lawyer.

At least six journalists reported to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker that police used excessive force at the scene. Faulk alleges that police officers knocked him to the ground and pepper-sprayed him in the face; one officer used his foot to push Faulk's head to the pavement, according to a [letter](#) Faulk's attorney sent to your office. Drew Burbridge has filed a lawsuit alleging that police beat him and repeatedly pepper sprayed him in the face. At least two journalists--Fusion videographer [Chris Burke](#) and University of Missouri student journalist [Davis Winborne](#)--allege that police pepper sprayed protesters and journalists indiscriminately.

All of the journalists arrested or assaulted were doing their job--one that often brings them to the scene of protests and law enforcement operations for the vital role of documenting these events for the public.

Press freedom groups have contacted the City Counselor's Office to urge prosecutors not to go forward in pressing charges. The office told CPJ that the charges are "under advisement" and that prosecutors have a year to decide whether to proceed.

This is not the first time that journalists have faced arrest and assault in the greater St. Louis area. According to the [Freedom of the Press Foundation](#), around two dozen reporters were arrested in protests in Ferguson, Missouri in the fall of 2014. While these arrests fell outside city bounds, this combined legacy is a troubling signpost for journalists' safety in the St. Louis area. It is more important than ever that the city take concrete steps to show its commitment to press freedom.

Journalists should not have to fear for their physical well-being at the hands of law enforcement when they cover newsworthy events. We ask you to conduct a thorough examination of cases in which reporters were assaulted or arrested and discipline individual officers found to have behaved unacceptably. We hope the investigation will also spur proactive steps, such as increased training for police officers and clear, enforced policies on how to deal with the press during protests.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Ellerbeck
North America Program Coordinator
Committee to Protect Journalists

Akili-Casundria Ramsess
Executive Director
National Press Photographers Association

Alfredo Carbajal
President
American Society of News Editors

Bobby Magill
President
Society of Environmental Journalists

Bernard J. Lunzer
President
NewsGuild-CWA

Dan Shelley
Executive Director
Radio Television Digital News Association

Delphine Halgand
North America Director
Reporters Without Borders

Dennis Anderson
First Amendment Chairman
Associated Press Media Editors

Gabe Rottman
Washington Director
PEN America

Hadar Harris
Executive Director
Student Press Law Center

Hannah Machlin
Project Manager
Index on Censorship

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser
Executive Director
The Media Consortium

Jonathan Peters
Press Freedom Correspondent
Columbia Journalism Review

Mark Glaser
Executive Editor
MediaShift

Molly Willmott
President
Association of Alternative Newsmedia

Rebecca Baker
National President
Society of Professional Journalists

Timothy Karr
Senior Director of Strategy
Free Press

Trevor Timm
Executive Director
Freedom of the Press Foundation

CC:

Lt. Col. Lawrence O'Toole
Interim Chief of Police
St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department

Julian Bush
City Counselor
St. Louis City Counselor's Office