

Twelve-year-old faces murder charges in the US

The system puts one of its victims on trial

David Walsh, Barry Grey
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The trial of the youngest person ever to be prosecuted in the US as an adult on first-degree murder charges begins May 11 in Pontiac, Michigan. Nathaniel Abraham is 12 years old and a student in the sixth grade. He stands four feet, eight inches and weighs approximately 93 pounds. On his visits to the court he wears leg irons and handcuffs.

He was 11 at the time of the alleged crime.

Nathaniel is accused of having shot and killed 18-year-old Ronnie Green outside a store on October 29, 1997, with a .22-caliber rifle. Nathaniel admits firing a gun, but firmly denies having aimed it at Green. The 12-year-old faces the possibility of life in prison without parole.

The upcoming trial has caused little uproar. The media have treated it as an unusual and precedent-setting, but not astonishing or outrageous event.

Nathaniel is being tried as an adult under the provisions of a state law that came into effect in January of 1997. One of the youngster's lawyers pointed out that the statute sets no minimum age for offenders. "This is a child and the statute won't make him into an adult just because the Legislature thinks he is," commented attorney William Lansat.

On the part of the media and the political and legal establishment, there is no discussion of the social realities that lie behind this case. Abraham is simply "a 12-year-old Pontiac boy." Nothing is said about his life experience or the social conditions facing working class families in Pontiac.

After all, in the inimitable words of former Senate Majority Leader and Presidential candidate Robert Dole, "The cause of crime is criminals."

Mr. Dole notwithstanding, the story of the Abraham family is typical of many thousands of working class families in the Detroit-Pontiac area. Gloria Abraham, Nathaniel's mother, is a single mother trying to get by while raising four children. Growing up in conditions of poverty, Nathaniel began to demonstrate psychological

problems at an early age. In 1994 tests revealed that he was emotionally damaged and functioning at a level three or four years below his actual age. Because of his participation in fights and other behavioral problems, he was expelled from three schools in two years.

Nathaniel reportedly began to hang out on the streets of Pontiac. His mother, now working nights, had a difficult time supervising him. In August 1997 the boy became angry at his aunt and sister and fired a BB gun at them. The police were called, as they had been on several other occasions. None of this brought any assistance to Gloria Abraham and her family.

As for the city of Pontiac, its economy was based on the auto industry. Its 70,000 inhabitants have endured two decades of plant closures, layoffs, budget cuts, deteriorating housing and schools, and general impoverishment. Neighborhoods that were once relatively stable and secure are today blighted by poverty and crime. Countless houses suffer from disrepair. Many are boarded up. The city has the air, like so many in the US, of general neglect, decay—and despair. Nathaniel grew up in one of the roughest and most devastated parts of the city.

Can there be any doubt that Nathaniel Abraham, from a very early age, understood that he was nothing in the eyes of those who run this society, that he was one of the "losers?"

One barely gets a glimpse from the front pages or the evening news of the conditions that bore down on Nathaniel. And for good reason. Michigan, as we know, is an economic success story. Gov. John Engler has, supposedly, by means of slashing cuts in welfare and massive tax breaks for the rich, produced a new era of prosperity.

But the story of Nathaniel Abraham, if told objectively and (dare we use the word?) humanely, would reveal a very different reality. People might be inclined to question more aggressively the prevailing nostrums about the blessings of the capitalist market and the inherent

inferiority of the poor and oppressed. All the more reason for governments, courts and the media to ignore the reality of Nathaniel Abraham's life, to repeat that the problem is individual moral evil, and make an example of this child by condemning him to a life behind bars.

In this twisted and obscene proceeding, who is really the criminal, and who the victim? In the fate of this child, who stands condemned? The troubled and deprived boy, or the society into which he was born?

Both Ronnie Green, who died from the gunshot wounds, and Nathaniel Abraham, his alleged killer, are victims of the profit system. So are Gloria Abraham and millions of others in the US, and hundreds of millions around the world. They are condemned to live under impossible conditions. Those who break under those conditions—due to the particular harshness of their lives or their particular emotional vulnerability—and commit some anti-social act are then pounced upon and savagely punished. Such is the state of social relations in America.

The trial of Nathaniel Abraham is not an isolated act of brutality. Executions are now commonplace in the US—of women, immigrants, mentally disturbed people. Prosecutors vie with one another to obtain the most punitive and vindictive sentences. The watchwords are: “Lock ‘em up and throw away the key!” and “Three strikes and you’re out!” And so, America’s prisons continue to fill up, and new ones are built, as the “success” of American capitalism finds its expression in the highest rate of incarceration of any major industrialized country in the world.

On a world scale, the profit system, after a few decades when it could afford to modestly ameliorate conditions, is reverting to its pure and undiluted state—naked class oppression. Social inequality is once again more or less openly defended: the rich are the elite of society, everyone else—human rubbish.

This state of affairs has to be justified ideologically. The intellectual conclusions drawn by the most insightful thinkers of the past several centuries—Rousseau, Marx, Freud and others—have come under systematic attack. Editorialists today sound a recurring theme: man is essentially a fallen creature, incapable of perfecting his society or himself.

The glaring level of social inequality is leading society inexorably to a crisis, with potentially revolutionary implications. From the point of view of the ruling class, everything must be done to pollute and degrade society and consciousness, to encourage selfishness and indifference to suffering. Violent repression will be

necessary to defend the profit system. Popular thinking must become inured to the most dreadful acts, carried out in the “interest of society.” After all, if you can with impunity lock up a child, perhaps execute him, what can’t you get away with?

Is there madness and irrationality in this official bloodlust? Yes there is, but there is also a rational kernel. This system has no answers to the social crisis and the alienation and despair that inevitably accompany it. The politicians and media spokesmen are intellectually and morally at sea. They lash out, recklessly and brutally. But they have nothing to offer except the building of prisons and execution chambers.

It is crucial that working people begin to see through the law-and-order demagogy and grasp its real implications. Few people are enthusiastic about the death penalty or imprisoning children, but many are politically confused and disoriented. They don’t as yet see any way of overcoming such social evils as crime, drug abuse, etc., in part because they don’t recognize that these phenomena are symptoms of a diseased social order, in part because they don’t understand the social and historical forces that create the conditions to put an end to this failed system and establish a genuinely humane society.

This makes even working people, themselves the victims of class exploitation, ideologically vulnerable. “Something must be done!” people say. “Terrible things are going on.”

Yes, something must be done. The Nathaniel Abraham case, in our view, is an indictment of capitalist society. The “something” that history calls out for is the abolition of this system and all forms of class privilege and oppression, and the establishment of a new society based on social equality. The working class is the social force that can, and must, carry out this task.



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