

The "Million Youth March"

Racist demagoguery and police-state repression

Bill Vann
10 September 1998

The so-called Million Youth March, led by the black anti-Semite Khalid Muhammad, began and ended in central Harlem September 5 under what amounted to a state of martial law imposed by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Some Harlem residents dubbed the event 'the Million Cop March,' since the number of police occupying the streets nearly equaled the estimated 6,500 demonstrators who attended. It was the largest police mobilization in the history of the largely black community: some 3,000 uniformed cops, packed in so tightly that they formed a virtual human wall around the rally; another 250 community affairs police in light-blue polo shirts, moving among the demonstrators; and an undisclosed number of undercover agents.

It would be no surprise if the latter category included the leaders and organizers of the march, and in particular Khalid Muhammad himself, since his provocative rantings from the platform seemed to have been scripted by the Giuliani administration to provide the perfect pretext for a police-state operation in a minority working class neighborhood.

When the 4:00 p.m. ending time for the rally approached, as hordes of police surged towards the stage to close it down, Muhammad called upon those in attendance to engage in combat with the heavily armed force surrounding them. 'If anyone attacks you, beat the hell out of them,' he shouted. 'In self-defense, if they attack you, you take their guns. If any one of these bastards attacks you, take their nightstick.' The former Nation of Islam leader then fled the stage, leaving his audience to its fate.

Under the circumstances it is remarkable that the result was not a bloodbath. Certainly the NYPD was prepared for a full-scale assault if any of the demonstrators had taken the bait from Muhammad. Helicopters buzzed low over the crowd as it dispersed, frightening children and deafening passersby. Riot-equipped cops were everywhere. Buses were standing by to load prisoners in the event of mass roundups. But there was no significant confrontation and only one person was arrested.

Even without a bloody denouement, the Giuliani administration used the demonstration to turn Harlem into an armed encampment. Water cannon, mobile command centers and mounted units were all deployed. Subway stops in the immediate vicinity were closed while streets throughout the

area were turned into no-go zones by police barricades and the hundreds of cops lining every block. Those who managed to get into the area of the rally were herded into sectioned corrals made up of metal barricades, separating the crowd into easily repressible units. The whole affair was videotaped so that police could identify participants.

A symbiotic relationship

From its inception, the controversy over the demonstration revealed a symbiotic relationship between the fascistic rantings of Khalid Muhammad and the police-state methods of Rudolph Giuliani. Muhammad called the demonstration, modeled on Washington's October 1995 Million Man March, in an effort to provide an audience for his anti-Semitism and racism. Giuliani issued a patently illegal and unconstitutional order banning the demonstration, in an effort to build up his political standing as a right-wing law-and-order demagogue in the Republican Party.

For Khalid Muhammad, the New York mayor's denunciations provided a focus and justification for his march. It allowed him to falsely identify his reactionary political agenda with the genuine concerns and resentments of black workers and youth in New York City who confront police brutality, no-knock searches and arbitrary arrests on a regular basis in a city that is characterized by social inequality as extreme as anywhere on the planet.

The demonstration received enormous publicity from the media, in large part because of Giuliani's attempt to ban it, which was followed by a court challenge and a judicial order permitting the march to take place in central Harlem during a definite time period, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on September 5. One minute after the time limit, on Giuliani's orders, the police moved in to close the rally down.

The most important aspect of the rally itself was Muhammad's failure to attract any sizable number of participants. This was all the more significant given the relentless advance publicity that the mass media provided for the demonstration, and the popular resentment over Giuliani's attempt to ban it in advance.

The media campaign has served to promote Khalid Muhammad, an otherwise isolated racist demagogue, into a

new leading 'black leadership' figure. This is a procedure developed over the years and turned into a system. A decade ago, the media anointed Rev. Al Sharpton, the former FBI informer and protégé of boxing promoter Don King, in a similar way. Farrakhan was likewise turned into an ubiquitous figure by the electronic and print media in the weeks leading up to the Million Man March.

Promotion of racial politics

The media buildup for elements like Khalid Muhammad is a calculated decision. Unable and unwilling to offer any solution to the social decline suffered by large sections of the working class, black and white, the American ruling class fosters all types of racist and communalist sentiments and politics to divert and divide the working class.

Racial identity becomes a means of mediating and controlling social conflict under conditions of an ever-widening gap between the conditions confronting the masses of workers, who have seen a steady decline in living standards, and a tiny elite that has enriched itself as never before in history.

How then to account for the relatively insignificant turnout for the event? Clearly police intimidation may have played a role. But Giuliani's attack on democratic rights no doubt encouraged some Harlem residents to turn out who would not have done so otherwise. The small turnout reflected, at least in part, a growing political awareness of the gap between the media hype for the rally and the real political and social issues confronting workers and working class youth.

The overwhelming majority of black workers and youth find the former Nation of Islam official's racist and fascist rantings repugnant. Denunciations of Jews as 'bloodsuckers' and justifications of the Nazi holocaust may attract attention and even get support from the most diseased nationalist elements, but they are not the basis for a mass movement.

Beyond the anti-white, anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic demagoguery, Khalid Muhammad's message in no way differentiates itself from that advanced by Farrakhan and, indeed, what passes itself off as the mainstream successor to the civil rights movement.

In promoting the event, organizers of the Million Youth March declared that its theme was 'black power into the year 2000--saving our youth, securing our future and fulfilling our God's divine plan for our people.' Alongside religion and the standard black nationalist rhetoric about 'nation-building' and 'reparations,' rally organizers called for the promotion of 'black businesses' as well as 'white corporate responsibility.'

If the procapitalist and thoroughly conservative character of the rally's agenda was not sufficiently obvious, the web site for the march included the sale of advertising and 'sponsorship,' urging donors 'not to sleep on this explosive advertising opportunity.' The organizers charged \$2,000 per booth for 'on-site retailing,' and \$1,000 to set up a table. Khalid Muhammad

is nothing if not a disciple of Farrakhan's huckstering and business schemes that have made the Nation of Islam leader a personal fortune.

Fiasco in Atlanta

If the attendance at the Million Youth March in Harlem was low, however, the crowd that showed up for events at the rival Million Youth Movement weekend in Atlanta was even smaller. Without the media notoriety supplied by Muhammad's racism and Giuliani's bullying, the combined forces of the NAACP, the Nation of Islam and Jesse Jackson's Operation Push could only draw a few hundred youth into the street.

None of these movements offer any program to meet the social needs of workers, the unemployed and working class youth. They all speak not for the masses of oppressed and impoverished, but rather for a thin layer of privileged and relatively wealthy black businessmen, politicians and corporate and state officials who have benefited, together with the ruling class, from the same economic transformations that have slashed the real wages of the working class.

In the context of such a political vacuum, and with the promotion of racial politics by the corporate-controlled mass media, the danger of fascist movements, both of the right-wing militia variety and the type envisioned by Khalid Muhammad, cannot be minimized. Under conditions of growing social crisis, such movements can grow side-by-side with the kind of police-state repression and unprecedented restrictions on democratic rights being developed by bourgeois politicians like Giuliani.

An effective answer to these dangers is possible only through the development of a new political movement based upon the international unity of the working class and a socialist program. Such a movement must be founded on the fundamental recognition that all workers, no matter what their skin color, national origin or religion, have a common interest in opposing the big business politicians and all those who defend the profit system by promoting racial division.

See Also:

Sharpton, lawyers guilty of defamation in Brawley case
[25 July 1998]

Ebonics and the danger of racial politics: A socialist viewpoint
[A lecture by Helen Halyard]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact