

Diallo murder charges, Louima assault trial

Spotlight on NYC police brutality throws Mayor Giuliani in crisis

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The four New York City policemen who mowed down an unarmed immigrant, Amadou Diallo, in a fusillade of 41 gunshots were arraigned March 31. Kenneth Boss, Sean Carroll, Richard Murphy and Edward McMellon all pleaded not guilty to charges of second degree murder.

An immigrant from the West African country of Guinea who worked as a street peddler, Diallo was riddled with bullets in the doorway of his Bronx home after the four policemen in the Street Crimes Unit accosted him on February 4.

The cops claimed that they approached Diallo because he fit the "general description" of a rape suspect in the area--i.e., he was young and black--and that he reached for something in his pocket which they thought was a gun. Diallo was unarmed.

The murder of Diallo outraged millions and galvanized opposition to the rampant harassment and police brutality which workers and youth face in New York, particularly in poor and minority neighborhoods. Demonstrations which began outside of police headquarters in lower Manhattan two weeks ago eventually resulted in more than 1,200 arrests for civil disobedience.

Just days before the indictments in the Diallo case were unsealed, another group of white police officers appeared in another courtroom, this time the Federal District Court in Brooklyn, as jury selection began in the case of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima. Police savagely brutalized Louima on the morning of August 9, 1997, after he was arrested outside a Haitian nightclub. He was sodomized with a stick in the bathroom of the 70th precinct station house, suffering such serious injuries to his rectum and bladder that he

remained hospitalized for two months. Four officers--Justin Volpe, Charles Schwarz, Thomas Wiese and Thomas Bruder--are charged with beating or sodomizing Louima. A Sergeant, Michael Bellomo, is charged with covering up the beating.

The convergence of the Louima and Diallo cases is not merely coincidence. It is indicative of the increasing incidence of police brutality and the increased attention it is receiving. The fact is that hundreds of thousands of people in the city, especially minority youth and young workers, live in daily fear of the police force. Incidents ranging anywhere from frisking and detention without cause to racist taunts, false arrest or beatings are common, and it is no exaggeration to say that most black and Hispanic families have either experienced this treatment or know of someone who has. The Diallo killing had such resonance in the city because so many families could see themselves in the place of the family and friends of this 22-year-old immigrant who was an innocent victim of a police execution.

New York's Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani waged his successful campaign in 1993 on an aggressive law and order platform. A former federal prosecutor, he denounced the Democratic incumbent, David Dinkins, as soft on crime. In office, Giuliani's proudest boast has been the declining crime rate, which he attributed to his "get tough" policy.

Giuliani has been traveling around the country mending fences with right-wing Republicans and promoting himself for statewide or national office once his two terms as mayor expire in 2001. His plans have run into a serious problem, however. For years he enthusiastically associated himself with the police.

Now he has become, for many, the symbol of a virtual police state.

The brutalization of Abner Louima took place in the midst of Giuliani's reelection campaign, and the mayor made a few sympathetic noises and appointed a task force to recommend measures to improve community-police relations. After he won a second term, however, Giuliani turned scornfully against the group he had himself appointed, sarcastically dismissing the few timid proposals it presented. This and similar incidents have now come back to haunt him in the wake of the Diallo shooting.

The unprecedented media attention given to the Diallo case, combined with the active involvement of Giuliani's political rivals in a civil disobedience campaign, reveal a loss of confidence in the mayor on the part of the city's financial elite. There are mounting fears that the level of surveillance and repression now employed by the NYPD could end up provoking the type of social and political explosion that it is meant to forestall.

This is the ultimate significance of the daily protests initiated by the Rev. Al Sharpton in front of police headquarters. These carefully orchestrated acts of civil disobedience, at which numerous dignitaries were handcuffed and arrested, were aimed at containing the broad anger before it took more dangerous forms. Among those arrested were virtually all the local black politicians, including former mayor Dinkins, Congressman Charles Rangel, State Comptroller H. Carl McCall and others. Clergymen, union officials, City Council members and other prominent figures volunteered for arrest. Former Mayor Koch, who presided over such police atrocities as the shotgun killing of Eleanor Bumpurs, had volunteered to go to jail, before he was sidelined with an illness. Even Governor George Pataki, a Republican rival of Giuliani's with his own formidable right-wing connections, obliquely criticized Giuliani for not "listening to criticism and responding appropriately to criticism."

In the face of a seeming consensus within the makers of official public opinion that at least some tactical shift is required, the mayor has been forced to make some attempt at toning down his law-and-order rhetoric and to meet with the Borough President of Manhattan and other prominent black officeholders. Police

Commissioner Howard Safir announced changes in the Street Crime Unit, including the addition of 50 minority cops, the end of plainclothes patrols by the unit, and the assignment of all members to "sensitivity" classes.

These cosmetic changes cannot alter the underlying causes of the police brutality which are inextricably bound up with the intense social polarization which has taken place in the city. New York has seen the greatest accumulation of wealth in history, even as the great majority of the city's population, increasingly fed by immigration from every part of the world, remains struggling with low-wage jobs and poverty.

The Giuliani administration has carried out a policy that is principally aimed at meeting the needs of the Wall Street finance houses and corporate headquarters that dominate the city's economic and political life, while guaranteeing the security of a layer of millionaires and billionaires that occupies some of the world's most expensive real estate within only a short distance of areas of intense poverty.

Police brutality is part and parcel of the onslaught on the poor. Welfare "reform," the cuts in healthcare and education, the skyrocketing rents have all created miserable conditions for millions of people, and the authorities have embarked on aggressive policing to maintain order under these conditions of unprecedented social polarization. As long as these economic and social conditions exist, the tactical changes will not alter the reality of police abuse and brutality for the working class.



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