

Larry Roberts discusses murder trial of 13-year-old Michigan youth

WSWS reporter interviewed on Seattle radio about Nathaniel Abraham case

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Larry Roberts, the *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent who covered the recent murder trial of 13-year-old Nathaniel Abraham, was interviewed Thursday by CBS radio affiliate KIRO in Seattle. Roberts condemned the second-degree murder conviction of the Pontiac, Michigan child and discussed the social issues underlying the case in the course of an hour-long interview by CBS syndicated commentator Dave Ross. The live call-in program reaches 130,600 listeners daily in Seattle, Tacoma and other western portions of Washington state.

Abraham, who was 11 when he was arrested in October of 1997, was tried as an adult under a two-year-old Michigan law that allows the state to try a child of any age as an adult for serious and violent offenses. Sentencing is set for December 14, and young Nathaniel faces the possibility of life in prison.

Ross introduced Roberts as a member of the Socialist Equality Party and explained that the *World Socialist Web Site* had provided excellent coverage of the case, including facts not presented in other newspapers and an analysis of the significance of the case. He quoted at length from the May 7, 1998 WSWS article "The system puts one of its victims on trial," citing the impoverished conditions under which Nathaniel grew up and the Social Darwinist outlook behind the criminalization of children at the hands of politicians and the courts.

Ross noted he had on the previous day interviewed Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca, who said the prosecution was necessary to protect society from a dangerous criminal. At the same time Gorcyca portrayed the state's effort to obtain a murder conviction of Abraham as an attempt to provide a

troubled youth with needed help.

Roberts said the decision to try Nathaniel, or any other child, as an adult had nothing to do with providing help. Gorcyca and the politicians who push for the prosecution children as adults claim that crime and other social ills "are individual problems that can only be addressed by throwing a large number of people in jail."

Roberts explained that the push for tougher sentencing, more police and more prisons was bound up with growing economic polarization in America. "We have a tremendous stock market boom in this country, but this has only benefited the elite who control the vast majority of the country's wealth."

Vindictive law-and-order measures victimize those who are deprived of the basic necessities of life, Roberts said. "Look at what is taking place in Pontiac and other cities across the country. There have been massive cuts in social benefits. Unemployment in Pontiac is double the national average. Five schools in the city have been closed. There are little if any recreational facilities for children. Parents are having a very difficult time making ends meet and there are no provisions for assistance."

Ross acknowledged these social conditions, but asked, "What about the shooting victim, Ronnie Greene? Don't the people of Pontiac want to be protected from the things that Nathaniel Abraham was doing?"

Roberts said that Ronnie Greene's death was a terrible tragedy. But he refuted any claim that there was a groundswell of support among Pontiac residents to prosecute Nathaniel as an adult and to throw him in prison. The WSWS correspondent explained that he had

interviewed Greene's mother just before the verdict was returned on Tuesday. "I spoke with Robin Adams and she did not feel that way. She was quite upset about the conditions. She recognized that Nathaniel needed serious psychological help and that the social mechanisms for children to receive that assistance no longer exist."

Roberts said there had once been 18 mental health hospitals in Michigan, but now there were only five. Six health facilities for children were closed and only one remained. "The mental health system has literally been dismantled as a result of the policies of this government. So where do people go to get the assistance they need?"

Ross acknowledged that Nathaniel's mother, Gloria Abraham, had sought help for her child. But, Ross said, the Oakland County prosecutor claimed she failed to keep appointments with agencies that could have helped her son.

"That's not true," Roberts answered. "You have to understand that for the prosecutor this was a political case. It is widely known that when Mrs. Abraham went to the police to get help they turned their backs on her. She went to the court system. They told her she had to go back to the police department to get the forms signed in order to have her son declared incorrigible. This was a mother who was desperate. She was looking everywhere she possibly could to get the assistance that she needed for her son. And every place she turned, she was turned away. Now, who is responsible for that?"

When Ross attempted to reiterate the prosecutor's claim that Michigan's new law would help children, Roberts interjected, "The prosecutor is not interested in rehabilitating and helping this child. Look at what is happening around this country. They are locking up people and throwing away the key. The US has the highest rate of incarceration of any industrialized country in the world. When this new law went into effect in January 1997, the prosecutors raced to be the first to prosecute a child for murder. There were so many inconsistencies that came out in the trial, it could only be explained as a political case."

Roberts explained that there were no legal grounds to charge Nathaniel with premeditated murder. He outlined the testimony of his friends, who said they had all target-practiced with the rifle and that they were not firing at anyone. Roberts also pointed out that the

trajectory of the bullet which killed Greene indicated that it had ricocheted off the trees at which Abraham was shooting, substantiating the defense's contention that Greene's death was accidental.

He cited the testimony of psychologists that children cannot comprehend in the same manner as a adult. "They cannot form the type of intent that the prosecutor was claiming," Roberts said. Moreover, the court-appointed psychologist "did tests that showed Nathaniel had an IQ of 75, borderline retardation, and was functioning at the mental level of a child of six to eight years of age."

Ross said he was prepared to acknowledge all of the "mitigating circumstances in the case: that Nathaniel was 11, that the prosecution went overboard charging him as adult, that his environment was poor, that his mother tried to get help." But acknowledging all that, "What do you do with the kid?" Ross asked.

"What about the idea that children should be provided with a safe environment, decent conditions and that there should be a future available for everyone?" Roberts responded. Ross replied that poor cities, such as Pontiac, did not have sufficient money to provide these conditions.

"Michigan has spent millions building prisons," Roberts answered. "Even if part of that money had gone to providing decent conditions for young people, there would be far fewer incidents like the death of Ronnie Greene."

Roberts said that under the capitalist system the people who work and create all of the wealth have no say over how society's resources are distributed. For millions of workers, conditions of life have deteriorated, he said. "Right now you have two political parties that both speak for the rich and pass laws to serve their interests. Working people need to build their own party to fight for their rights and create a genuinely democratic society, one that will develop and allocate society's wealth on an egalitarian basis and give the majority of people the power to make decisions about where resources should go," Roberts concluded.



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