

More letters on the Amadou Diallo verdict

2 March 2000

Dear editors of WSWWS,

Are we entering a dark nightmare of the American soul from which there is no return? The murder of Amadou Diallo and the state-contrived exoneration of his murderers signals a nadir in human rights on both a national and a global scale. As an English teacher of foreign exchange students, students of all colors from all over the globe, I have brought the facts concerning the Diallo murder and this horrendous acquittal before a class of 30 college-age students from France, Brazil, Colombia, Russia, Japan, Korea, Thailand, China and the Caucasus, and virtually all of these students are aghast and dismayed that such a ruling could prevail in the land they have come to looking for justice and that ever-distant carrot of prosperity. Each one of them is painfully aware that Diallo's fate could be their own. Even from the most cynical of business interests, and aside from all discourse about human and civil rights, does this ruling make good business sense?

As a newscaster on San Francisco Liberation Radio (93.7 FM), I read both of yesterday's articles from WSWWS on the Diallo verdict over the air to approximately 5,000 San Francisco residents. These articles are the most incisive and intelligent I've yet seen anywhere, and I seriously hope you will continue to draw more detailed conclusions from this case.

Thank you so much for your excellent efforts.

In solidarity,
SJT

1 March 2000

To the editor,

While I share with other readers a sense of outrage over the verdicts in the Amadou Diallo shooting case, it occurs to me that all the media coverage of this case has obscured an even more egregious example of the excessive use of police force that occurred recently on the opposite end of the country. I am referring here to the case of Michael William Arnold, who on March 27 of 1998 was shot a total of 106 times by a veritable army of law enforcement personnel in Hawthorne, California.

Fifty-five of Arnold's wounds would later be found to be serious enough to have caused his death.

As with the Diallo shooting, the evidence clearly indicates that the victim was unarmed at the time of the shooting. Though found by coroner's investigators to be clutching an air pistol in his right hand, the chief medical investigator would note that Arnold had been shot multiple times through the head and right arm, as well as three times to the right hand, making it virtually impossible for him to have maintained his grip on a gun. Also, since the gun was undamaged, the bullets striking Arnold's hand would have had to miss the gun in doing so. As further evidence of a set-up, the medical examiners found gunshot residue on Arnold's hand, about which a spokesman noted "You can't get gunshot residue from firing an air gun," though "if someone who had fired a weapon touched his hands, you could transfer the residue."

While there are clear parallels between the Diallo and Arnold cases, there is also one very significant difference. In the Diallo shooting, the four officers involved belonged to a special plainclothes division with a reputation for strong-arm tactics. In the Arnold shooting, however, those involved were rank-and-file uniformed officers representing three different police agencies: the California Highway Patrol, the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Office, and the Hawthorne Police Department. The number of wounds inflicted on Arnold also indicates that there were literally dozens of officers involved with the shooting.

The FBI has reported that, on average, only about one in three shots fired by officers in the field find their target. In the Diallo case, for example, with officers firing from fixed positions at close range at a trapped and stationary target, less than half the shots struck their intended target. It can then be surmised that for Mr. Arnold to have been hit 106 times would have required that as many as 300 shots be fired. Even if every officer involved had emptied the clip of their gun, some two dozen officers firing simultaneously would have been required to inflict the number of injuries that Arnold sustained.

It is no doubt precisely because of this key difference in the cases that there have been no charges brought in the Arnold case, no high profile trial, and no mentions by the press. This case has been kept from public awareness precisely because it illuminates far more clearly the extreme levels of police violence permeating American society than does the Diallo case. For had the verdict gone the other way in the Diallo case, the four officers involved would surely have been denounced as rogue elements, as was officer Justin Volpe in the recent Abner Louima case.

But how are we to apply the "bad apple" theory when several dozen officers from three different law enforcement bodies, randomly assembled at an alleged crime scene, decide to riddle a man's body with 106 bullets? Clearly, sacrificing a few rogue cops would not have sufficed in this case. There is in fact no handy back-up plan to explain away a shooting of this nature. What possible explanation could there be for an army of police to resort to such an incomprehensible level of violence?

This case clearly raises troubling questions about the rising levels of police violence being perpetrated, and of the acceptance of such violence within the law enforcement community. The fact that none of the officers involved appears to have had any qualms with participating in this sordid affair speaks volumes about the degree to which the nation's police forces have been militarized.

It is to be expected then that the case of Michael Arnold has received no press coverage. The questions raised would be too disturbing, and answers much too difficult to come by. Which is precisely why it is crucial that organizations such as yours give this case at least equal standing to the case of Amadou Diallo.

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29 February 2000



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