Five murdered at Wendy's restaurant in New York City—the brutalization of everyday life

Fred Mazelis
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The massacre of five workers at a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in Flushing, Queens late last month reveals something about life in New York City at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

New Yorkers are used to hearing about violent crime, which is typically sensationalized in the media. Even so, the circumstances of the Flushing killings stunned most people.

Five workers, aged 18 to 44, were brutally gunned down for the grand sum of $2,400. This tragedy took place, not in some deserted or dangerous location, but on the busiest shopping street and a short distance from the busiest subway station in the borough of Queens, home to some two million people.

Two men walked into the Wendy's restaurant on Main Street about 11 p.m. on Wednesday, May 24, shortly before closing. They waited until the last customers had left. Then one of them, who had once worked at the store, went downstairs to the manager's office and announced a robbery. The six other workers in the restaurant were then called downstairs, where they were tied up, their mouths sealed with duct tape and plastic bags placed over their heads. In the next few minutes they were marched single file into a walk-in refrigerator where, in what turned out to be an unsuccessful attempt to leave no witnesses to the robbery, they were shot execution-style in the back of the head.

The victims represented a cross-section of the poorer sections of the city's working class. Two were immigrants, including the 27-year-old manager, Jean Dumel Auguste, from Haiti, and 40-year-old Ali Ibadat, from Pakistan. Ruben Nazario, 44, was born in Puerto Rico. Also killed were Anita Smith, 22, and Jeremy Mele, 18. Jaquione Johnson, also 18, was gravely wounded. Patrick Castro, 23, was shot through the cheeks and left for dead, but gradually freed himself after the assailants had left, reaching a telephone and calling the 911 emergency number about 90 minutes later.

Two suspects were arrested less than two days after the killings. While the robbery may have been carefully planned, it was a far from perfect crime. The robbers left behind enough evidence to make their identification and apprehension relatively easy.

The police acted on a telephone tip when they picked up John B. Taylor, 36, who had previously worked at the Flushing Wendy's and at McDonald's restaurants elsewhere in the city. They later arrested Craig Godineaux, 30, as Taylor's accomplice. Both suspects quickly confessed, implicating each other and offering contradictory accounts only on who did the shooting.

Even without the tip, there were other signs that would have quickly led to Taylor. He had skipped bail a few months ago after being arrested in a robbery at a McDonalds in Queens, and was suspected in a string of four other robberies or attempted robberies of fast-food restaurants over an eight-day period in June 1999. Eyewitnesses, including other customers in the restaurant, people who had seen the two men leaving after the killings, and one of those shot, all picked Taylor out of a group of photos. The police also recovered a matching palm print, the pistol used in the killings, and a videotape showing the suspects in the restaurant just before the murders.

The gruesome crime provoked a predictable reaction in the media and from Democratic and Republican politicians. Republican Congressman Rick Lazio, just nominated to run for the US Senate following the withdrawal of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, called for the imposition of the death penalty. Giuliani himself said the killings showed the need for even more police on the streets of the city. The media interviewed grief-stricken relatives to obtain statements calling for capital punishment. Black politician Al Sharpton weighed in with a call for life sentences for the suspected killers.

Gun control advocates, meanwhile, used the killings to call for tightening of gun registration requirements, suggesting that Taylor, with his minor criminal record, might then not have been able to obtain the pistol used in the crime.

These official and semi-official responses are symptomatic of the present political climate, in which the genuine causes of all social problems are studiously ignored in favor of demagogic efforts to divert popular concern into calls for more police, prisons and state-sponsored killing.

Despite this, the media has been forced to note some unusual aspects of this case. Most murder victims know their assailants, and the crimes are committed on impulse or in the heat of passion, or at least with the expectation of a big payoff. Multiple victims are seen in cases of mentally deranged individuals who usually end by committing suicide.

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The suspects in the Wendy's shootings are somewhat different. Though they have minor criminal records, they are not teenagers, they are not unemployed, and they have families. Taylor, the father of four children, worked for 14 years as an assistant manager at a McDonalds restaurant in Manhattan. He lived in Lefrak City, a huge high-rise apartment complex in Queens. Godineaux is the father of a five-year-old girl. The men had met recently at their current jobs, at a clothing store in the South Jamaica section of the borough.

A full understanding of the social psychology which finds expression in such depraved indifference to human life is not arrived at glibly or simply. There are, nevertheless, some obvious factors. The conditions which lead to this toxic combination of rage, desperation, and futility bordering on self-destruction must be considered. What is revealed is the extreme brutalization of human relations in the midst of what is officially described as a golden age of wealth and prosperity.

The great majority of New York City's population is simply not involved in the unprecedented explosion of wealth and its ostentatious public display. Thirty percent live in poverty, and another 50 percent struggle to stay even with skyrocketing housing costs and other expenses. Millions of immigrants and the poor live in cramped apartments, send their children to decaying public schools and cope with inadequate health care and other public services. The five who died were among 200,000 Wendy's workers around the country, and these are in turn part of millions who work in dead-end jobs in the fast-food industry. They work for the minimum wage; assistant managers like Jean Auguste Dumel earn a few dollars more an hour.

It is not only that the boom has passed these workers by. The attitude toward the poor is at best one of official indifference, and at worst outright criminalization. For the past decade the media and politicians of both parties have endlessly proclaimed that workers have no one to blame but themselves if they have not benefited from the Wall Street frenzy. Hundreds of thousands have been kicked off the welfare rolls and forced to take minimum wage jobs or to find other means of subsistence. The homeless are treated as criminals who must be forced into the city's dangerous and demeaning shelter system.

On top of this, the authorities have made it clear that they consider the answer to the social ills which have not disappeared to be the continued buildup of the police, tougher sentencing, more prisons and capital punishment. Vast sections of the city have become places where workers, youth and immigrants, particularly the black and Hispanic populations, fear for their safety and their very lives at the hands of the city's police force. The demonization of the poor and the endemic police brutality and contempt for the working class has exploded twice in recent years, first with the police torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima and then the police killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo.

At the same time there is an absence of any progressive struggle against the rising inequality. There is no labor movement, or civil rights movement worthy of the name, conducting any fight whatsoever against the assault on the working class. On the contrary, the largest city union, District Council 37, has come to symbolize the filthy corruption of the trade union bureaucracy, with most of its officers facing charges of ballot-rigging or the stealing of hundreds of thousands of dollars from the membership. During this same decade in which the gulf between rich and poor has reached such obscene levels, the “labor leaders” have simply joined the pigs feeding at the Wall Street trough. They have endorsed every reactionary policy, including welfare “reform” and the law-and-order crusade.

No one can speculate on what was going through the minds of the men who killed the five Wendy's workers, people who could have been their own neighbors. There is no doubt, however, that all of the above conditions help to create the social pathology expressed in this crime. Taylor had worked at McDonalds for years before he began descending into a life of petty crime. He was nearing 40, and still stuck with low-paying fast-food jobs. His increasing demoralization could not have been unrelated to the dead end he found himself in, while from every radio, television and newspaper there issued declarations that everyone had never had it so good.

What the killers lacked was any human feeling, any empathy for their victims. Taylor's fellow fast-food workers were simply obstacles to his robbery plan, who had to be eliminated. This outlook is the logical byproduct of the extreme individualism fostered by capitalism at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Anyone seriously interested in pondering the causes of the Wendy's murders and concerned with preventing other such tragedies must consider these underlying issues—the tremendous social tensions, the growing polarization between the rich and poor, the cult of wealth and competition in which the signal is given that almost anything is permitted in the race for the fast buck. In the absence as yet of any alternative perspective of collective struggle and human solidarity, individual "success" is everything and everyday life becomes increasingly brutalized.

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