

New York police, Mayor Giuliani attack Bruce Springsteen for criticizing Diallo shooting

David Walsh
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The campaign mounted against rock and roll performer Bruce Springsteen for raising the killing of New York resident Amadou Diallo in a new song is a crude attack on freedom of speech and artistic expression. Police organizations in New York, Police Chief Howard Safir, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and sections of the media have all weighed in, denouncing Springsteen for daring to sing about Diallo's death in a storm of police gunfire in February 1999.

The four cops involved, who fired 41 shots, claimed they believed the African immigrant was reaching for a gun when, in fact, the unarmed man was trying to pull out his wallet. The four were acquitted of all charges earlier this year.

Springsteen first performed the song, "American Skin," as yet unrecorded, in Atlanta on June 4. Lyrics to the song include the following: "Is it a gun?/Is it a knife?/Is it a wallet?/This is your life/It ain't no secret/The secret my friend/You can get killed just for living in your American skin/41 shots/41 shots/41 shots."

After the June 4 concert the head of New York's State Fraternal Order of Police, Bob Lucente, called Springsteen a "dirtbag" and a "floating fag." Patrick Lynch, president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, wrote a letter to PBA delegates and members calling for a boycott of Springsteen's shows. Lynch wrote, "I consider it an outrage that [Springsteen] would be trying to fatten his wallet by reopening the wounds of this tragic case at a time when police officers and community members are in a healing period."

On Tuesday afternoon hundreds of New York City police rallied in Manhattan against Springsteen. "We

don't need a millionaire coming down here and making money off our backs ... on a terrible, terrible tragedy," Lynch told a cheering crowd.

Following Giuliani's withdrawal from the race for the US Senate seat from New York, the media suggested that the mayor had turned over a new leaf. But his latest attack on critics of the New York Police Department demonstrates that his confrontation with prostate cancer has in no way altered his predilection for using the mayor's office to bully and intimidate social dissent.

At a June 12 press conference that Giuliani shared with Police Chief Safir, the mayor condemned Springsteen. "Despite the fact that they were acquitted ... there's still people trying to create the impression that the police officers are guilty," Giuliani declared.

The parents of Amadou Diallo praised Springsteen. His mother, Kadiatou, told the *New York Post*, "It keeps [Amadou's] memory alive." Diallo's parents attended the first of ten concerts Springsteen is giving at New York's Madison Square Garden, the final leg of a year-long reunion tour. They met with the performer and told him they appreciated the song.

When Springsteen broke into "American Skin" at the Garden, according to a *New York Times* reviewer, "The crowd grew silent, then rose in applause.... Scattered boos were quickly enveloped in the cries of 'Bruce!'" In fact, the Diallo case touched millions of people in the US and there was deep opposition to the jury's acquittal of the police.

The attacks launched against Springsteen are an obvious attempt to silence opponents of the status quo. As far as Giuliani and the police organizations are concerned, there is no right to criticize the actions of the police, and, in one way or another, such criticism

should be stifled. It is a sign of the reactionary state of affairs in New York City politics that the police and supporters of the police constitute one of Giuliani's principal constituencies.

The silence from the Democrats, including Democratic Senate candidate Hilary Clinton, and the liberal establishment in New York is predictable and in keeping with their recent conduct. In typical fashion, the *New York Times* on Wednesday published two articles with opposing viewpoints on the Springsteen affair, while taking no editorial position of its own.

The piece supportive of the singer, by critic Jon Pareles, went out of its way to avoid sounding any anti-establishment themes. Pareles assured his readers that “American Skin” is “no anti-cop diatribe.” He continued: “With piano chords behind Mr. Springsteen's care-worn voice, it's a resonant elegy and a reflection on how fear can become deadly.”

John Tierney, echoing the PBA's Lynch, entitled his article, “Has the Boss Really Joined Ranks With the Limousine Liberals?” The piece oozes with venom for critics of the police. Tierney doesn't bother expressing sympathy for Diallo. Commenting on Springsteen's refrain, “41 shots,” he says sarcastically, “Mr. Springsteen did not specifically explain why it is worse to be killed with 41 shots than with one. But he is firmly on record against the extra bullets.”

Tierney acts as a mouthpiece for the PBA, writing: “During their year of vilification, culminating in a trial in an Albany courthouse with a mob outside chanting for their heads, the officers became figures you might expect Bruce Springsteen to sing about: working-class guys trying to do their jobs while oppressed by larger social forces. You might not have expected him to play to the mob.”

If one sets aside the pseudo-populist rhetoric, the outlines of the world view of a significant section of upper-middle-class New Yorkers are clear: the police are Tierney's “working class trying to do their jobs,” i.e., protecting him and his wealth, and then there is the “mob,” including Diallo, who need to be dealt with. It is significant that such reactionary trash appears in the liberal “paper of record.”

New York City is the most economically polarized city in the US. Social tensions are high. Giuliani, the police, the liberal establishment and the media exist in one world; Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima (the Haitian

tortured by police in 1997) Patrick Dorismond (a 26-year-old security guard shot to death March 15 in a confrontation with plainclothes police) and millions of working class and poor people live in another world.

The media treatment of the controversy over “American Skin” has to be seen in this light. The majority of those interviewed by television and print journalists on the issue have been police, relatives of police and friends of police, with predictable results. No one has seen fit to travel to the Bronx and interview west African immigrants—or anyone else in the poorer areas of New York where the police routinely abuse and harass the residents—about Springsteen's song. These are non-people, as far as the media are concerned.

The official response to “American Skin” is a warning sign. Giuliani and the police officials speak for the entire ruling elite, in attempting to generate a political climate of repression and fear. Springsteen should be congratulated and defended for speaking out on the Diallo murder.



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