

The killing of Frederick Finley: sudden death in an American city

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There is something distinctly American about the killing of Frederick Finley. The 32-year-old black worker was choked to death by plainclothes security guards outside the Lord & Taylor department store at a mall in suburban Detroit on June 22. The altercation that ended in Finley's death began when five guards, three white and two black, grabbed his 11-year-old stepdaughter and accused her of shoplifting. The item in question was a \$4 bracelet.

That day Finley and his family went to the Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn to do what millions of Americans are encouraged to do—spend money. They purchased several items at Lord and Taylor and applied for a store credit card. But the afternoon's shopping suddenly turned into the sort of tragedy from which a family never recovers.

The killing evoked considerable outrage among workers and youth in Detroit, and on July 5 some 7,000 people, mostly young and predominantly black, rallied outside the Dearborn mall to demand the arrest of Finley's attackers and action against Lord & Taylor. The day after the protest, involuntary manslaughter charges were brought against one of the guards, Dennis Richardson. Another rally to protest the killing was held outside the federal building in downtown Detroit on July 17, attended by about 1,000 people.

In the days since Finley's murder a concerted effort has been mounted by the local media to vilify the dead man and his family. They have been portrayed as an organized shoplifting ring, and much play has been given to outstanding misdemeanor child abuse charges against Finley's wife.

The aim of this media campaign is to suggest that in some way Finley “got what he deserved,” or at least that he was the type who invited trouble. But all the sludge dredged up by the press cannot obscure the fact that a man's life has been wasted. Even if all the allegations about the Finley family were true, would they warrant the killing of a man for the theft of a \$4 bracelet? Or, for that matter, a \$4,000 bracelet?

A human life has been extinguished by private guards acting as vigilantes in the defense of a multimillion-dollar company. The sudden and horrific death of Finley reminds us of the value placed by official society on the rights of property, as compared to the life of a worker.

This time the killer was not a policeman, but rather a private

security guard. The past two decades have seen an explosive growth in the presence of both police and security guards in the daily lives of working Americans. Private guards—inside and outside stores, businesses, offices—are everywhere to be seen. The decade of the 1980s and early 1990s saw the almost routine use of company-paid goons, uniformed and armed, in labor struggles. The names of the firms are well known—Pinkerton, Wackenhut, Vance, etc.

The fact that security guards—employees of private companies—consider it their right to detain people in public places says a great deal about the real extent of democratic rights for millions of working and poor people in America. Under Michigan law, security guards have the right to use “reasonable force” and detain individuals for a “reasonable period of time” if they believe “probable cause” exists to suspect criminal activity.

On the job too the worker is subject to the dictates of the owner, for all practical purposes the lord and master of his commercial fiefdom. Security is omnipresent. Computer programs oversee workers' productivity. Employers track office workers' Internet usage. In practice employees have little recourse against arbitrary or unfair dismissal.

The unions, where they exist, have long since ceased to be instruments of workers' democracy, even in the most limited sense. They have embraced the corporate doctrine of union-management partnership and become little more than appendages of the employers.

The proliferation of guards and police in all aspects of daily life, from the workplace to the mall, would seem to contradict the official government and media version of the current state of affairs in America—that things have never been so good. In reality, swift and sudden death in an apparently peaceful, even prosperous suburban mall says something essential about present-day conditions in America. The brutal methods of the powers-that-be reflect the extremely tense character of class relations in the US.

The class struggle, though largely hidden and, from the side of the working class, politically unfocused and disorganized, nevertheless seethes just below the surface of everyday life. It has been imbued with enormous intensity by the widening gulf between the minority who have benefited from the stock market

and profit boom of the past two decades, and the large majority who have not. Levels of social inequality such as those that exist today can, in the end, only be maintained at the expense of the democratic rights of the masses of working people.

Such is the broader context of the killing of Frederick Finley. His death was not an isolated incident, nor can it be dismissed with talk of “overzealous” guards. Such atrocities are inevitable given the social and political conditions in America today.

Indeed, less than a month earlier, on May 31, another death occurred in connection with an alleged shoplifting incident in the Detroit area. Gloria Teresa Terrell, a 43-year-old black woman and mother of five, was crushed to death in a trash compactor outside the Value Village second-hand store in an impoverished Detroit neighborhood. She was hiding from security guards who had accused her of stealing a used pair of shoes—worth no more than a few dollars.

Many of those protesting the killing of Frederick Finley see it as an example of racial profiling, and the Finley family may have come under increased scrutiny that day at the Fairlane mall, at least in part, because they were African-American. But the guard who killed Finley was also black. Indeed, the manager of the mall is a black woman. Her position is in all likelihood bound up with protests organized by the Detroit NAACP, black clergymen and others in previous years against the harassment of blacks by the Dearborn authorities. These official civil rights leaders mounted a boycott of the Fairlane mall to put pressure on the business community, with results that have become typical of the campaigns led by figures such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton—some perks for a few more privileged blacks, and little if any change for the masses.

All such protest campaigns, based on the politics of race, skirt the more fundamental source of the oppression of working and poor people—of all races: the social inequality and exploitation inherent in the profit system. Racism is a particularly vile expression of the oppression of working people, and it serves the interests of those who wish to maintain the status quo. For good reason the maxim of ruling classes down through the centuries has been “divide and rule.”

The leaders of the protests over the Finley killing—Al Sharpton, Martin Luther King III, Horace Sheffield of the National Action Network, Detroit NAACP leader Wendell Anthony, Congressman John Conyers and others—insist that this atrocity is simply a matter of race. The issues of social inequality and the right-wing pro-business policies of both major parties are rarely, if ever, raised. This is not surprising, since these individuals are themselves representatives of the more privileged layers of blacks who have moved up the social and economic ladder over the past two decades, while the vast majority of blacks saw their living standards stagnate or decline. They are, moreover, part and parcel of the Democratic Party establishment, whose standard bearer, Bill Clinton, has presided over the destruction of welfare and massive cuts in Medicaid, food stamps and other programs for the poor.

There is a direct connection between the racial politics they espouse and the conventional, even conservative policies they advance. They dare not make any demands that challenge the basic prerogatives and property rights of Lord & Taylor. Rather they seek to channel popular anger over the killing of Finley—and similar cases of police and police-related violence—into calls for a federal investigation and more investment in the inner city.

Sharpton, Anthony and Conyers, along with the rest of Detroit's officialdom, were frightened by the substantial turnout at the July 5 rally. They are doing everything in their power to keep the situation under control.

As a substitute for the mass mobilization of working people—black and white—against official violence and other attacks on democratic rights, they are calling on blacks to buy stock in Lord & Taylor's parent company, May Department Stores, so that they can attend shareholders meetings and influence company policy on security practices. It is difficult to imagine a more timid or futile perspective.

It is significant that none of the speakers at the two rallies held thus far have so much as mentioned the death of Gloria Terrell. This is not simply an oversight. Terrell might have been black, but she represented a social layer of poor workers who live in a world apart from the well-off politicians, preachers and notables who are designated by the media as official civil rights leaders.

Their efforts are directed toward increasing black ownership of business. One of the demands of the protest organizers in the Finley case is for May Department Stores to build new stores in Detroit. Far from a struggle against big business, this amounts to an offer of partnership between the retail chain and the civil rights officials.



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