

Thousands protest killing of Detroit man by mall security guards

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An estimated 7,000 people attended a rally Wednesday evening, July 5 in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan to express their anger at the killing of a 32-year-old black worker, Frederick Finley. The victim was strangled to death by plain-clothes security guards working for the upscale department store Lord & Taylor, located in the Fairlane Town Center shopping mall. Finley was assaulted in the store's parking lot by the guards who accused his stepdaughter of shoplifting.

The protesters, overwhelmingly working class and primarily black, held signs reading, "Life is worth more than \$4," in reference to the jewelry Finley's stepdaughter is alleged to have shoplifted, and, "Why no public apology?" and "No justice, no peace." The overwhelming feeling of the rally participants was that any black person could be the next victim.

It was not until one day after the rally, on July 6, that the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office issued a public statement that one of the guards involved in Finley's death, Dennis Richardson, 29, would be charged with involuntary manslaughter. If convicted, Richardson could face 15 years in jail and a \$7,500 fine.

Geoffrey Fieger, attorney for the family, called the manslaughter charge "incomplete justice," stating Richardson should have been charged with second-degree murder. He also asked why the other guards involved in the attack were not being charged.

At least four other guards were involved in the confrontation besides Richardson, but the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office has not said whether it will bring other charges. Dearborn police held three security guards, including Richardson, overnight on the day that Finley was killed, but released them without charges the next day. The Dearborn Police Department issued a statement all but openly defending the actions of the guards, going so far as to suggest that the Finley family was acting as a shoplifting ring.

While there have been several conflicting reports about the events surrounding the strangulation death of Finley, no one

disputes that nothing more was involved than the alleged theft of a \$4.00 bracelet by Frederick Finley's 11-year-old stepdaughter.

According to the police reports released on June 22, security guards employed by Lord & Taylor observed Teera Walker on a video camera placing a beaded Indian bracelet on her wrist as she and her sister were walking in the store behind Finley and his wife Carla Sullivan-Finley. Frederick and Carla purchased several items while they shopped at the store in addition to filling out a credit card application, giving all of their personal information.

After the family left the store, five security guards dressed in plain clothing followed the family to the parking lot. The family has stated that the guards did not identify themselves and all five guards confronted the two young girls. Attorney Fieger has acknowledged that the child walked out of the store with the bracelet, but contends it was simply a case of absentmindedness and the family had intended to pay for the item.

Finley, ahead of the family and by this time in the car, got out when he saw the group of adults confronting the two girls. According to the police report, taken at the scene and based solely on interviews with the security guards, Finley punched Richardson before he was restrained by the other guards. The guards knocked Finley to the ground, and one guard handcuffed Finley's right hand while another held his legs. At the same time Richardson placed his knee on Finley's neck and cuffed his left hand.

Richardson, a Detroit firefighter moonlighting as a security guard, placed Finley's neck in a choke hold, or "semi-restraining head lock position," according to one police report. Within 10 seconds Finley's body went limp.

The brutal killing of Finley was documented in the police reports of officers who arrived while Finley was being held down by the guards. Dearborn police officer Daniel J. Ayotte's report states, "I observed a black male (heavy build) face down, with another black male on top of him. The black male on top turned out to be a Lord & Taylor Loss Prevention officer.... The black male Loss Prevention officer

had his arms around the other male's head and neck and stated he was handcuffed in the front. The black male on the ground appeared to be unconscious and unresponsive.... Officer Ellis checked for a pulse and found it to be erratic. The black male Loss Prevention officer then yanked the other black male suspect off the ground, stating, 'Get the F__k up,' and then dropped him back down on the ground. The black male suspect was still unresponsive and a rescue unit was called."

Phil Jewell, an eyewitness to the incident, recalled he heard Finley cry out, "Get off me, get off me." Jewell said his voice went silent and his face turned purple. "I knew right there that he was dead."

According to Geoffrey Fieger, Richardson pulled a chain Finley was wearing around his neck, cutting off his air supply at the trachea.

On Friday, June 23, the Wayne County Medical Examiner carried out an autopsy of Finley but was unable to make a determination of the cause of death. On Monday, June 26, Fieger had an independent autopsy conducted by nearby Macomb County Medical Examiner Werner Spitz, who concluded that Finley died of asphyxiation. Later, on June 30, the Wayne County medical examiner finally concurred that Finley died of asphyxiation, or neck compression.

The July 5 protest

Several national and local speakers addressed the July 5 rally outside Lord & Taylor, primarily raising the demand for a federal investigation of the Dearborn mall and the immediate arrest of the security guards involved in Finley's death.

The speakers included Al Sharpton, Martin Luther King III, US Congressman John Conyers, comedian Dick Gregory, Geoffrey Fieger, Washington DC radio personality Joe Madison and several local ministers and civil rights activists.

The rally organizers raised four demands: (1) the immediate indictment of the security guards involved in Finley's death; (2) the settlement of the \$600 million lawsuit filed Geoffrey Fieger on behalf of the Finley family; (3) a federal investigation of Lord & Taylor and the Dearborn mall; and (4) clarification of the procedures of security guards for following people into parking lots.

Reverend Horace Sheffield, one of the organizers of the rally and president of the local National Action Network, asked rhetorically, "How far can they go? Can they go into your home, into your bedroom? This is clearly wrong."

Other speakers at the rally charged Lord & Taylor with racial profiling and the needless murder of a man over an alleged shoplifting incident. "We must make the federal government come in and prosecute and investigate this mall," stated Sharpton. "We do not accept the right of

security guards to be the judge, the jury and the executioner."

US Representative John Conyers reiterated the same demand, telling the crowd that he had just spoken to US Attorney General Janet Reno and had told her, "We want the feds down here to investigate." Another protest has been planned for July 17.

Several speakers at the rally recalled the boycott against the mall organized by the NAACP in the 1980s provoked by the city of Dearborn's documented racist practices: blacks were not allowed to join the Dearborn Golf Club and would be chased out of the city's parks. The Fairlane mall, located in Dearborn—a city with a black population of less than one percent—carried out discriminatory hiring practices and mall security regularly harassed minorities. Since that time, a black executive now runs the mall and blacks have been hired as clerks as well as security guards. Dennis Richardson, the security guard being charged in Finley's death, is black. However, the rally organizers were unable to explain how under these conditions racial profiling and the killing of Frederick Finley could still take place.

There is no question that racism was involved in the killing of Frederick Finley and in other cases such as the police murder of Amadou Diallo in New York City. But the efforts of Sharpton and others to explain the killing solely on the basis of the race of the victim blocks any understanding of the social and class issues that underlie such brutal attacks, let alone revealing on what basis a political struggle can be developed to stop the attacks on democratic rights. In the end, the speakers could do nothing but urge protesters to appeal to the Clinton administration to defend their rights.

The speakers made no reference to the worsening social conditions affecting masses of working people—both black, white and immigrant—and the unprecedented social inequality that plagues America. But these conditions lie at the root of the massive buildup of the police, the hiring of hundreds of thousands of private security guards and the law-and-order policies of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The politicians and media regularly criminalize the poor and blame them for their own miserable conditions. In this way they create the atmosphere in which almost any amount of violence can be justified to protect private property—in this case, a \$4 bracelet.



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