

Detroit police kill again

Larry Roberts
15 September 2000

In the early morning hours of September 8 another Detroit citizen was shot and killed by a police officer—the second fatal police shooting in the space of 10 days. The victim of the latest shooting was 49-year-old Dwight Turner, an autoworker at Ford Motor Company for over 20 years.

Turner was shot in the chest while he was standing on his front porch. Before police arrived he had fired his legally licensed handgun at a stray dog that was terrorizing the neighborhood. Turner had repeatedly called city authorities to capture the dog, but his calls went unanswered. The police claimed they shot Turner in self-defense after he ignored their demands to drop the gun and instead turned the gun against them.

Neighbors and friends strongly contradicted the police version of events. “They didn't give him a chance,” said Victoria Jenkins, who lives across the street from Turner. Jenkins said she heard shouts of “Put down the gun,” followed immediately by three or four shots. Carol Washington, a co-worker of Turner, said he was not the kind of person to pull a gun on the police. “You can't tell me this is just,” stated Washington.

The eyewitness's account was corroborated by the Wayne County Medical Examiners' report that showed that the fatal bullet entered Turner's body in a downward angle, even though Turner was standing on his porch three feet above the officer who shot him. This would tend to indicate that Turner was bending to put down the gun—just as neighbors said—when the policeman shot him.

Geoffrey Fieger, attorney for the family, said, Turner “wasn't shot in the commission of a felony or misdemeanor. He had done nothing wrong.” With two teenage sons and earning \$70,000 a year, Fieger said, Turner had no reason to commit suicide by pointing a gun at the police.

Before any serious investigation began Police Chief Benny Napoleon defended the actions of his officers, repeating the claim that they were defending themselves against an armed man who refused to drop his gun, and who instead aimed a weapon at them. “Someone points a

gun at one of my officers, I would expect him to defend himself,” Napoleon said.

Gregg Bowens, a spokesperson for Mayor Dennis Archer's office refused to comment on the shooting, and only complained that the case would become attorney Fieger's thirteenth lawsuit against the City of Detroit.

A little more than a week before, Detroit police were involved in another brutal killing. On August 30 a police officer shot and killed Errol Shaw Jr., a mentally ill deaf mute, whom police claimed was “menacing them” with a garden rake. Shaw was 15 feet from the five police who surrounded him when he was shot twice in the chest. Family members and neighbors cried out to police that Shaw could not hear or respond verbally to their commands and told them not to shoot. But their appeals were ignored. As the father of six lay on the sidewalk bleeding, police did little to assist him and barred family members from comforting Shaw.

Deputy Police chief Herman Curry immediately blamed Errol Shaw for the shooting, saying, “He gets a rake, and he began to move toward the officers, and they ask him to drop the rake. Now the rake is in striking position. The officers, for their safety, fire two shots.”

In the aftermath of the shooting it was revealed that the officer who killed Shaw, 23-year-old David Krupinski, had been arrested in January 1999 in nearby Dearborn for brandishing his police pistol, using racial slurs and threatening to shoot a black motorist during a traffic dispute. Moreover, before joining the force Krupinski had allegedly been a gang member and known as a bully by his neighbors. He was hired over the objections of police recruiters, because his father was a senior cop.

The policeman who shot Dwight Turner—11-year veteran Wayne Little—also had a penchant for violence. Little has shot three people during his the career and has been reprimanded four times—for physical abuse against his former wife and former girlfriend.

The growing public anger over the shootings and the unequivocal defense of the police by city authorities has generated concern in the city's business and media

establishment. The *Detroit News*, in an article following the shooting of Errol Shaw, stated that the “Detroit Police Department, or at least some of its members, are out of control.”

The local media has presented the shootings as the misdeeds of “rogue cops” or the lack of sufficient police training. In reality the Detroit police are engaged in systematic brutality. These are only the latest of a series of deaths that has given Detroit the highest rate of fatal police shootings of any major city in America.

According to FBI records, Detroit, with a population of nearly 1 million, averaged 10 fatal police shootings each year between 1990 and 1998. Its rate of 0.92 fatal shootings per 100,000 residents nearly tripled that of New York (0.39), with 7.3 million residents.

Recent investigative reports by the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* noted that between 1993 and 1998 members of the Detroit police force killed 40 people. Thirty-five of the officers involved in the killings were exonerated following internal investigations, while four were convicted of misdemeanors. The reports revealed a pattern of planting illegal drugs and other evidence on victims and shooting residents in the back. In most cases, the police got away with murder after so-called investigations by internal departments, the Wayne County prosecutor's office, and the Michigan State Police.

Such brutality and corruption is not, of course, unique to Detroit. Similar practices have been recently exposed in Los Angeles, New York and other cities. Such measures have been encouraged in the atmosphere of law-and-order demagoguery cultivated by both Democratic and Republican politicians. But the persistence of police brutality in Detroit is particularly significant. More than 25 years ago, the city's first black mayor, Coleman Young, pledged to end systematic police killings, particularly of minority workers and youth, by hiring hundreds of black officers and appointing black police chiefs.

But as Detroit was transformed into the poorest big city in America—the result of the wave of plant closings and mass layoffs in the auto industry during the 1970s and 1980s—Young all but abandoned these pretensions and embraced the politics of law and order. Unwilling and unable to address the social crisis—the city's economic and political establishment, now manned increasingly by a corrupt layer of upper middle class blacks, relied ever more on the police to suppress the working class—black and white.

Mayor Dennis Archer, who replaced Young in 1993, has encouraged the police even more. His tenure has

coincided with an economic expansion that has dramatically intensified the social polarization in the city. A close political ally of the Clinton-Gore administration, Archer has removed obstacles to big business by lowering taxes, establishing urban enterprise zones and subsidizing privately owned casinos and sports stadiums.

One crucial aspect of his policy of improving the city's “business climate” has been the dispatching of hundreds of police to cordon off more affluent visitors to the city's casinos and other attractions from the mostly impoverished people in the blighted neighborhoods. Outside of these islands of so-called economic prosperity the bulk of Detroit's population lives in a city that can only be described as dysfunctional.

Years of budget-cutting and the decay of public services has led to a collapse of its basic infrastructure. This summer the city was paralyzed by two major failures of its outmoded electrical system, blacking out schools, senior citizen centers, hospitals and traffic and street lights.

A former lawyer for the auto industry and state supreme court judge, Archer has had no reticence in identifying with and defending the actions of the police. He epitomizes the city's ruling elite—which has enriched itself over the last decade—and has nothing but contempt for the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact