Workers speak out against police killings at Detroit town meeting

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19 September 2000

A standing-room only audience of well over 500 people attended a September 14 meeting in Detroit called in response to mounting criticism of the city's police department, which has been involved in a spate of recent fatal shootings. The town hall meeting, called by the Board of Police Commissioners ostensibly to conduct a “dialogue with the community,” erupted in anger when police officials refused to answer why citizens engaged in no criminal activity were being murdered by police.

Detroit has the highest rate of fatal police shootings of any major US city, with at least 42 people killed in the last 5 years. Recent newspaper reports have revealed how the police operate with impunity, knowing full well that they will be exonerated by “investigations” conducted by fellow officers, the Michigan State Police or the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office.

The most recent shooting took place on September 8, when Detroit police officer Wayne Little killed Dwight Turner, an autoworker, on the front porch of his home. Police claimed Turner pointed a gun at them. Turner had been shooting at a stray dog that had been terrorizing the neighborhood.

A little more than a week earlier, on August 29, police fatally shot Errol Shaw Sr., a mentally impaired deaf mute, who officers said approached them with a rake. The policeman who killed Shaw, David Krupinski, had been arrested in 1999 for threatening to kill a black motorist during a traffic dispute.

From the outset of the meeting it was apparent that Police Chief Benny Napoleon and his supporters in the administration of Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer conceived of the event as little more than a public relations stunt. An effort was made to pack the list of speakers with supporters of the Archer administration and Chief Napoleon. The speaking order was determined on the basis of cards submitted before the meeting, ensuring that a disproportionate number of those called to take the microphone were supporters of the police department. In a further effort to pull the teeth of opposition, those addressing the board were limited to just two minutes speaking time.

Despite these bureaucratic maneuvers, the anger of Detroit residents over the rampant police brutality made itself felt. Workers were particularly incensed at the arrogance of Chief Napoleon, who sat in stone-faced silence throughout the meeting, refusing to respond to or even acknowledge concerns raised by those addressing the commission. It was significant that a substantial portion of those who came to express opposition to the police shootings were older trade unionists and professional workers, a social layer that in the past had provided a certain base of support for the Archer administration.

Among those speaking were relatives and friends of the victims of police shootings. Vernon Shaw, the father of Errol Shaw, denounced both Mayor Archer and Chief Napoleon, who he said had made no attempt to visit him or contact him since the killing of his son.

A co-worker of Dwight Turner disputed claims that the Ford worker had threatened police officers. “I worked with him for 30 years. He had the utmost respect for authority. I know factually that he had been a federally licensed gun dealer. He was a former police reserve officer. When Dwight Turner was instructed to put down the weapon he was in the process of putting down his weapon.”

Sherri LaRoque, the sister of Theodore LaRoque, a young worker killed in 1998 by an off duty Detroit cop, spoke out about her brother's slaying. “My brother was murdered by one of Mayor Archer's bodyguards. We

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were naïve. We thought we would get justice. The witnesses all said it was an unjustified shooting. Instead all we got was Benny Napoleon's ‘hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.'"

Theodore LaRoque was shot multiple times by officer Anthony Goree during a verbal altercation in front of the latter's house. Goree shot the unarmed LaRoque through the side door of his vehicle. At no time during the incident did Goree identify himself as a police officer or warn LaRoque that he was armed. At the time of the shooting Goree was a member of an elite group of officers assigned to guard Mayor Dennis Archer and his family.

The victim's mother, Nancy LaRoque, a housekeeper and a lifelong resident of Detroit told the WSWS, “They said it was poor judgment but justified. All of the witnesses said that the officer did not identify himself. He did not tell my son that he was armed.

“I think the turnout at the meeting is good. I think there has to be some kind of outside investigation to get an unbiased approach. They are saying that the police have the right to kill someone who is unarmed. I think the police department has to have a better screening of employees. I think any time there is a complaint against the police, immediate action should be taken.”

The meeting revealed the sharp class divide in Detroit, where a small layer of middle class black businessmen and administrators has prospered amidst mounting poverty and social decay. A number of these types took the floor to defend the police shootings and denounce critics of Chief Napoleon. The attitude of this layer was summed up by one speaker who told police commissioners: “Thank you for protecting us.”

The majority of those in attendance, however, reacted with hostility to attempts by supporters of Chief Napoleon to defend the actions of police. On several occasions those praising the Detroit cops were drowned out with jeers.

Sandra Hines said, “We aren't going to tolerate the police department killing the citizens of Detroit. Our city is going to pot. I am about ready to bust about what is happening in the city. You all seem to be concerned only about material gain. We didn't put you in there to do for the rich people, but to do for us. Don't forget, it is ‘we the people.'"

Another worker, Derrick Battite said he had taken time off from his job in order to attend the meeting. He told of an incident where police attempted falsely to accuse him of a shooting spree. “The police accused me of being the criminal, and I was the victim. A man on a bicycle shot me August 12. I walked down to make the report with the bullet still in my back. They treated me like a criminal. You don't want the people here to start policing themselves, do you?”

A number of middle class professional people also spoke against the shoot to kill policy of the police department. A representative of the Autism Society of America spoke in relation to the shooting of Errol Shaw. He called on Chief Napoleon to provide training for police to recognizing and dealing with people afflicted with autism.

Ken Wright, a member of Amnesty International, reported that in 1999 his organization sent a letter to Chief Napoleon that raised concerns about police brutality. “We received a notice saying they had received the letter, but there was no further dialogue,” he said.

The meeting indicated that the attempts by the Archer administration to stonewall criticism of police violence are failing. In an effort to shore up his position chief Napoleon is attempting to enlist the support of the NAACP and other middle class religious and community organizations to whitewash the killings. On September 14 Napoleon appointed a 10 member panel, headed by Rev. Wendell Anthony, president of the Detroit chapter of the NAACP, to review police policies on lethal force.

In accepting his appointment Anthony went out of his way to demonstrate his loyalty to the powers that be declaring that his group would seek to “help save lives, protect the innocent, and ensure the safety of those police officers who are putting their lives at risk.”

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