

Mass protests against racist murder in Norway

Steve James
13 February 2001

Tens of thousands of Norwegian citizens took to the streets of the capital Oslo and several other major towns and cities on February 1 to protest the murder of a 15-year-old Ghanaian-Norwegian. Benjamin Labaran Hermansen was killed last month in the Holmlia area of Oslo. With 40,000 on the streets of Oslo alone, press reports estimated the turnout to be the highest seen since a demonstration against the European Economic Community (the predecessor to the European Union) in 1972. Norway's population numbers only four million. Memorial demonstrations were also held on February 6 in the neighbouring Scandinavian capitals of Stockholm and Copenhagen, to coincide with Benjamin's funeral.

Benjamin was the victim of what appears to have been an unprovoked racist attack. Five neo-nazis were immediately arrested and another, Joe Erling Jahr, was held in Denmark pending extradition back to Norway. The alleged perpetrators, around a gang called the "Boot Boys", include two 17-year-old women and two 21-year-old males. Gang members reportedly told police that under 19-year-old Jahr's leadership they had set out that evening to "get some foreigners". Another report suggested that the group drove around on a "fishing" expedition looking for someone to attack. One of those arrested, Erik Lauritsen, has already spent seven months in jail for an arson attack on a kiosk run by Kurdish immigrants. Three of those under arrest for Benjamin's murder had been arrested and released two months ago after an attack on a Norwegian-African man. The group had apparently carried out a series of racist attacks and terrorised Holmlia and other areas of Oslo for some months.

One Reuters report suggested that Benjamin might have been targeted because of an appearance he made a year ago on Norwegian state television channel NRK,

in which he denounced his treatment at the hands of Danish racists.

The press and the Labour government have called for tougher laws against the country's neo-nazis. Minister of Culture Ellen Horn went on NRK to propose that neo-nazi groups be banned. Horn, along with Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, Crown Prince Haakon and visiting NATO Secretary General George Robertson, attended the February 1 demonstration. The *Dagsavisen* newspaper editorialised: "This must be a new eye-opener for the authorities and all the others who have refused to acknowledge Nazism and racism in Norway. Far too few have taken this diabolical wickedness seriously. Far too many have underestimated the explosive criminal force concealed in nazi and racist groupings."

By presenting the small numbers of nazi thugs and their youthful admirers as something inexplicably alien to Norwegian society, the Labour government and newspapers like *Dagsavisen* try to conceal the responsibility of all the major parties for the growth of anti-immigrant racism.

Norway has some of the toughest anti-immigration policies in Europe, and the fiercely anti-immigrant and far-right Progress Party (PP) is currently supported by around 22 percent of voters. Labour, both in and out of government, has adapted its policies to embrace the xenophobic agenda put forward by PP and has cooperated with them at all levels of government.

Benjamin's murder was the latest in a series of racially motivated attacks and killings that have been encouraged by the prevailing political attitude to immigrants. The Norwegian Anti Racist Centre recorded 1,300 incidents between 1987 and 2000 that could be classed as racist, including cross burnings, shootings, incidents of arson, vandalism, violence and

harassment. In contrast, the Central Statistics Bureau registered just 32 reports of racist incidents in Norway in 2000. In 1999, 17-year-old Indian-born Arve Beheim Karlsen fell to his death while being chased by a gang shouting, “Kill the nigger.” To date his tormentors have only been charged with assault.

In 1999, the Norwegian Supreme Court upheld a decision allowing private landlords and accommodation agencies to choose as tenants “Norwegians only”, or people who “have some sort of idea of Norwegian culture and Norwegian way of living”. The attorney general is currently attempting to prevent a UN commission hearing evidence from an Oslo tenant to whom housing was refused on racial grounds.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact