

Ohio city under martial law, hundreds arrested

2,000 demonstrate against police violence in Cincinnati

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Some 1,000 people attended the funeral April 14 for Timothy Thomas, a nineteen-year-old black youth gunned down the previous Saturday in the latest in a series of fatal shootings of blacks by police in the southern Ohio city of Cincinnati.

Following the service, mourners joined with hundreds protesting the police killing outside the church and marched peacefully through the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood where Thomas was shot. Some 2,000 people of all races participated in the march.

The killing of Thomas, who was unarmed, sparked three days of rioting, centered in the impoverished, mostly black Over-the-Rhine district that adjoins downtown Cincinnati. Mayor Charlie Luken declared a state of emergency April 12 and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew throughout the city of 331,000.

A massive police presence was bolstered by state troopers and sheriff's deputies, who carried out hundreds of arrests and used rubber bullets and bean bags fired from shotguns to put down protests and scattered looting. On Sunday Luken eased the curfew somewhat, ordering the streets to be cleared by 11 PM.

To date 164 people have been booked on charges of rioting, arson and looting, and another 434 have been arrested for curfew violations. About 50 people have been treated for injuries at local hospitals.

Cincinnati, which lies along the Ohio River across from the state of Kentucky, is traditionally a politically conservative town that votes Republican in national elections. The eruption of Over-the-Rhine and other predominantly black districts has revealed the explosive state of social relations in cities throughout the US. Entrenched poverty, staggering levels of social inequality, police abuse directed primarily against

minorities are conditions that describe virtually every major urban center.

It is a stark commentary on the underlying social and political crisis in America that within 100 days of the installation of a right-wing Republican president—on the basis of widespread voter disenfranchisement and a Supreme Court ruling blocking a fair count of the votes cast in Florida, and in the initial stages of a sharp economic downturn—a major American city has been placed under martial law.

Saturday's funeral service for Thomas was held in the shadow of a virtual police lockdown of parts of the city. The nervousness of the authorities, both local and national, over the prospect of even wider unrest was indicated by the presence of Republican Governor Bob Taft, Republican Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell and NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, formerly a Democratic congressman and leader of the Black Congressional Caucus.

Last week President George W. Bush, in the midst of negotiations over the release of the US spy plane crew being held in China, ordered Attorney General John Ashcroft to send Justice Department officials to Cincinnati to begin an investigation into repeated incidences of police violence against the city's black population. Ashcroft issued a written statement appealing for calm.

Outside Saturday's funeral service several hundred protesters shouted and held up placards with slogans such as "It's Time to Shoot Back" and "It is Right to Rebel." After the funeral, police fired bean bags at some dozen demonstrators. According to eyewitness reports the police attack was entirely unprovoked. One of those injured in the incident, a 34-year-old woman

from Louisville, Kentucky, said, “They just pulled up and started shooting at us.”

Fearing renewed rioting, Police Chief Thomas Streicher met with religious leaders in the crowd and appealed to them to restore calm.

Timothy Thomas, who leaves behind a three-month-old child, was shot at close range by police officer Steven Roach, who had chased the youth into an alley and cornered him. Thomas was being sought by the police on fourteen warrants, all of them misdemeanors or traffic violations. Scott Greenwood, a Cincinnati resident and general counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, said of the warrants: “Five of them [were] for not wearing a seat belt while driving. That’s a charge of last resort when they can’t get you for something else.”

Thomas was the fourth black man killed by Cincinnati police since November 2000, and the fifteenth to die at the hands of the police since 1995. A recent study of conditions in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood conducted by the University of Cincinnati points to the social roots of pervasive police repression of its residents. The average income in Cincinnati is \$14,420 a year per person, but in Over-the-Rhine it is just \$5,359. Some 48 percent of residents of the area are on public assistance.

The unemployment rate for the greater Cincinnati region has averaged 3.8 percent over the past five years. But among blacks in Over-the-Rhine the jobless rate is nearly 30 percent.

The stark contrast between wealth and poverty is symbolized by the presence of Music Hall, a 19th Century Gothic structure that houses the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, in the midst of urban blight and empty lots.



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