

Demonstrators in Cincinnati demand end to police brutality

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More than 2,000 protesters rallied in downtown Cincinnati on June 2 and held a “March for Justice” to demand an end to police brutality. People from many cities, including Detroit, Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles, joined Cincinnati residents in the demonstration.

The rally, attended by a racially mixed crowd of workers, university students, youth and middle class professionals, was held some two months after the April 7 police killing of an unarmed black teenager, Timothy Thomas. The death of Thomas sparked several days of protests and rioting. Martial law was declared and local and state police were deployed on a massive scale to put down the eruption of social discontent.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party circulated a leaflet entitled “New strategy needed to fight police violence and racism” (see link below). The statement explained that police brutality and racism were rooted in the social and class divisions in America, which had been exacerbated during the Clinton years. It stressed that these social evils could be overcome only through the independent political mobilization and unification of the working class in its own party.

Timothy Thomas's killing ignited anger and frustration that had been building for years in Cincinnati, where over the past six years 15 black males have died at the hands of the police.

Angela Leisure, Timothy's mother, addressed the June 2 rally and headed the march, laying a wreath in an alley in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood where her son was killed. Thomas, who was wanted for traffic violations and for eluding the police, was chased by nearly a dozen officers before he was shot in the chest at point-blank range.

“I've been praying that my son will be the last one to die—but I don't think he will be,” Leisure told the protesters. “They have not made any changes to prevent this from happening again. Who will be the next parent to lose her child?”

“My son Timothy Thomas was my life,” she continued. “The others who have been killed—blacks, whites and other nationalities—were also the center of someone's life. And they are no longer here. We seek justice because of these things.”

Leisure concluded to widespread applause: “We have started to come together as a people. The big word around here is race. This is a racial issue in a sense, meaning all races have to stand together. This is not a black against white issue. This is human race against injustice. We must keep that focus. We have to continue to stand and be heard.”

Protesters carried handmade signs with photos of police abuse victims and slogans opposing racism and police brutality. Others held signs demanding the dropping of charges against the 800 people arrested for rioting, looting and curfew violations, after the city's Democratic mayor, Charlie Luken, declared a state of emergency and ordered a crackdown against street protests.

The demonstration attracted widespread interest and support as marchers went through the downtown streets and then through the largely minority Over-the-Rhine and West End neighborhoods.

A number of the speakers provided details about the Cincinnati Police Division's long record of abuse of working class and minority residents. William Kirkland, from the African American Cultural Commission, related how several police strangled and killed another black man, Roger Owensby Jr., last November. After the killing, he said, the police did not attempt to use their standard justification, i.e., that the suspect had been in a state of “agitated delirium.”

“They had used this excuse too many times before,” Kirkland said. “This time they said it was a ‘choke hold gone bad.’ As a former Marine, I've never seen a choke hold gone bad. That was a good choke hold. It did what it was supposed to do—kill the man.”

Many in the crowd were angered by the inaction of city and county officials regarding the police, and their disregard for the worsening social conditions in working class and minority neighborhoods. Following the riots in April—the largest disturbance in Cincinnati since 1968, and in the US, since the 1992 Los Angeles riots—city officials, business leaders, ministers, civil rights spokesmen and others sought to quell popular anger with promises to address long-standing concerns over police brutality and poverty.

Since then, however, a Hamilton County grand jury has dropped all serious charges against Steven Roach, the officer who killed Timothy Thomas, and merely indicted him on two misdemeanor counts. Meanwhile, county Prosecutor Mike Allen has demanded severe punishment for those arrested during the riots.

As for addressing the chronic social problems in the city's poorest neighborhoods, the only thing that has emerged from the mayor's coalition of business leaders, Democratic politicians and local ministers is a proposal for a few thousand low-paying summer jobs for youth.

In the weeks preceding the demonstration, city and police officials mounted a campaign of intimidation in an effort to discourage protesters and speakers from showing up at the June 2

rally. Officials suggested that the protest would lead to violence and withheld a permit for the demonstration until the last moment.

The Cincinnati Police Division (CPD) was the most provocative. Two weeks before the protest the CPD issued a press release on its preparations. Under its six-point guideline on the use of force to “suppress or prevent criminal activity,” the CPD said police could use deadly force to protect officers and others from death or serious physical harm, fire beanbag shotgun rounds or 40 mm foam rounds to “prevent unlawful acts,” and use CS gas to “deal with disorderly persons and crowds.”

On May 18 the CPD and its supporters held a march to honor officers killed on duty, and used the event to denounce the planned protest. Fraternal Order of Police President Keith Fangman gave a medal to one cop for the killing, last November, of a mentally ill homeless man accused of shoplifting.

These conditions contributed to the feelings expressed by marchers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. One young worker said, “We have seen police brutality and the death of African-Americans for years. The rebellion occurred because things have reached a boiling point. The politicians have done everything to protect the police. Mayor Luken says there's a ‘race problem’ in the city, but he never admits there is a problem of police brutality. What we have in this city is a few big businesses and rich people, like [Chiquita Brands CEO and Cincinnati Reds owner] Carl Linder, who control the economic power, the media, and keep this a conservative city.”

Though such sentiments were widespread, the organizers of the March for Justice offered no serious perspective for a struggle against police brutality and racism. Various speakers from the platform, which included clergymen, union officials, Democratic politicians and lawyers, urged the audience to place their faith in the courts, and even the Bush administration's Justice Department, to rein in the police. Black ministers and businessmen, including Rev. Damon Lynch III, whose son heads the Black United Front and is co-chair of the mayor's race relations panel, suggested that boycotts and other protests demanding money for black-owned businesses and “enterprise zones” would bring positive results.

Barely a word was mentioned about the growing social inequality in the city. Nor did any of the speakers attack the Democratic-controlled city government for its pro-business policies, including the use of the police to target poor people in neighborhoods that are being gentrified for the benefit of real estate developers and affluent layers of the middle class.

The most overt effort to deflect criticism from the Democrats and conceal the social and class issues that underlay the April riots was made by John Gilligan, former Democratic governor of Ohio and head of a Cincinnati panel established in 1996 to reform the police force. He told the audience, “We are not here to heap blame on anyone for the civil disturbances several weeks ago.” He then urged the crowd to patiently wait for the outcome of a federal investigation into the Cincinnati police, saying, “These matters are now in the hands of our government officials and there is nothing we can do or say today that should or can attempt to influence these matters. They will proceed according to the laws of the land.” Only if the results proved unsatisfactory, he insisted, would further protests be justified.

Gilligan suggested that the riot had little to do with economic and social inequality. Instead, he claimed, it was caused by the “perception” of “persistent habits, practices and attitudes of injustice.” Attempting to spread the blame for police violence on the victims as well as the perpetrators, he pompously declared, “Each of us bears some share of responsibility for the unfair and unjust conditions that cripple the human potential of so many of our fellow citizens.”

Many in the audience spoke out against Gilligan's remarks, and the former governor was forced to stop speaking. At this point a leader of the Committee for the March for Justice took the microphone and implored the audience, in the name of maintaining the “coalition,” to let Gilligan speak.

The main political aim of the clergymen, union leaders, businessmen and civil rights officials who organized the march was to convince workers and youth that the city's political establishment, and in particular, the Democratic Party, was responsive to their demands for economic and social justice. A leaflet distributed by the Committee for the March for Justice acknowledged the fear among these elements that anger against city officials was reaching a breaking point. “We have worked hard to prevent our march from being distracted and devalued by violence on the part of some who correctly feel frustrated with the lack of progress,” the leaflet read. It went on to appeal to city officials, and even the Fraternal Order of Police, to demonstrate concern for the protesters' demands, or face the possibility of a “long hot summer.”

Another section of the Cincinnati political establishment held a separate meeting on June 2 in an effort to present itself as more militant. However, the “Black Caucus,” which included Cincinnati's former mayor, Dwight Tillery, various religious leaders, including officials of the Nation of Islam, and other black nationalists, presented no serious alternative to the official demonstration. Instead they told an audience of 400 to 500 people that the answer was more black-owned businesses, voter registration drives and “black political empowerment”—slogans that have been used for decades to divert minority youth and workers into the dead end of racial politics and help the corporate and political establishment divide the working class.

At a forum in Cincinnati on the eve of the demonstration, SEP supporter Jim Lawrence, a retired General Motors auto worker from nearby Dayton, Ohio, told the audience: “Racism has long been used against the working class to set us one against the other. Today, with growing social inequality affecting every section of the working class, the wealthy elite in America is seeking to establish new forms of rule. This can be seen with the increase in police repression and the theft of the 2000 presidential election by the Republican right. The wimpish Democrats won't save us or defend our rights. For that we need an independent party that is dedicated to the unity of the working class.”



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