

Cincinnati police beat unarmed black man to death

Jerry Isaacs
3 December 2003

An unarmed black man was fatally beaten by six police officers in Cincinnati, Ohio early Sunday morning, reviving popular anger over police brutality in the city, which saw three nights of rioting in April 2001, following the murder of an unarmed black teenager by a white policeman.

The beating of 41-year-old Nathaniel Jones was captured on video by a camera mounted on a police squad car and widely broadcast throughout the US. The tape showed five white cops and one black officer repeatedly beating Jones with metal batons as they knocked him to the ground, fell on him and handcuffed his arms behind his back. After being hit dozens of times, Jones—a 350-pound man with a history of severe hypertension and an enlarged heart—stopped breathing. He was left in the parking lot of a fast food restaurant without the police taking any emergency measures to save his life before an ambulance arrived. Jones was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Earlier, police arrived at a White Castle restaurant in the North Avondale section of the city after an employee called 911 emergency services to report that a man had passed out in the grass nearby. Paramedics who were the first to respond called on police to assist them, saying Jones had awakened and was becoming a “nuisance.” Friends say Jones may have passed out because he suffered from narcolepsy, a sleep disorder that causes frequent and unexpected loss of consciousness. He had also reportedly just returned from an all-night round-trip drive to Cleveland, where his two children live with their mother.

Police officials, city authorities and the media immediately defended the actions of the cops and branded Jones as a violent drug abuser. Even before concluding what the cause of death was, Hamilton County Coroner Dr. Carl Parrott announced that traces of cocaine and PCP had been found in Jones’s system. Although there was no

indication that he was under the influence of any drugs at the time of the confrontation with the police, Dr. Parrott declared that these stimulants “are sometimes linked to bizarre and violently aggressive behavior.”

The coroner’s comments became the occasion for the city’s Democratic mayor and the police chief to justify the murder of an unarmed man. Visibly angered that the national news media had broadcast the videotape of the police beating, Mayor Charlie Luken, said, “The first thing I see is a police officer being violently attacked. It appears that the police responded appropriately and consistent with their training. They’d been attacked with a deadly weapon—a 400-pound man.”

Cincinnati Police Chief Tom Streicher told local reporters it was irrelevant that Jones “didn’t appear to be armed” because he could have taken one of the cops’ guns and shot them. “It’s a matter of life and death to these officers,” he said. “If it takes some violent action” to arrest someone, the chief said, “then it takes violent action.”

The news media joined in the official whitewash. *Cincinnati Enquirer* columnist Peter Bronson summed up the official indifference over Jones’s death, writing, “It’s that simple. Resisting arrest or attacking a cop is hazardous. Our first assumption should be that the cops who are trained and given a gun and a badge to protect the rest of us were doing their tough and dangerous job the way they’re supposed to do it.”

In the segment of the video released by the police, Jones is seen trying to defend himself. What the tape does not show, however, is what police did to provoke such a reaction. Such incriminating evidence could have easily been deleted.

Jeff Thompson, Jones’s roommate and close friend, told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, “I can’t really say what made him do what he did, but what I’m concerned about is that we didn’t see what happened before the tape started

rolling and what happened after it stopped.” He added that although he was a big man, Jones—the father of two young boys who had recently lost his job—was not violent.

“One-and-a-half minutes are missing—the part just before Nathaniel Jones is seen defending himself,” Amanda Mayes, a spokesperson for the Coalition for a Just Cincinnati, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We want to know what was in that segment.”

Mayes continued, “All we know is that six police officers hit Jones between 40 and 50 times with metal batons, including on the head. When he stopped breathing they let him lay in the parking lot to die. They administered no help to try to save him after they have beaten him to the brink of death.

“Now the six policemen are on administrative leave—in other words, on paid vacation. Mayor Luken and Chief Streicher should resign and the policemen involved should face criminal charges.

“African-Americans are outraged,” Mayes added. “There have been nine deaths of black men in the last four years since Luken became mayor. None of the officers involved have ever been disciplined. Since the death of Timothy Thomas in April 2001, there have been three more killings. Last February the police killed Andre Sherrer, a young man in his 30s, who they said had broken into a store. The police chased him into an alley and shot him.”

In addition to the police killings, she said, the police had kidnapped, maced and let loose one black youth in a park miles away from where he was picked up. In other cases an officer was suspected of taking weapons from crime scenes in order to plant them on frame-up victims, and another was soliciting sex by threatening women with arrest.

While attempting to sweep the police killing under the rug, local and federal authorities reacted quickly in an effort to prevent any repeat of the protests and riots that erupted in the city two-and-a-half years ago. The Bush administration announced that the Justice Department would investigate Jones’s death. Other investigations were also announced by the Citizens Complaint Authority—an oversight division headed by a former police officer, which was set up under an agreement with the Justice Department after the 2001 riots—and the police department’s internal investigations section.

In April 2001, Cincinnati was the scene of several days of protests and rioting after the police killing of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed teenager and the fifteenth black male killed by police over the previous six years. After

rioting erupted in several minority neighborhoods, officials placed the city of 331,000 under a state of emergency, imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and dispatched hundreds of police officers and state troopers, who fired tear gas, rubber bullets and beanbags filled with lead pellets at angry citizens. By the time the violence was over scores of people had been hospitalized, millions of dollars in damage had been done to storefronts and businesses, and more than 800 people were jailed for rioting, looting and curfew violations.

In the aftermath of the riots the city made a settlement with the Justice Department to reform the police department and agreed to pay \$4.5 million to plaintiffs who had accused police of stopping and searching them because of their race. Police brutality in the city continues unabated, however, as it does throughout the US.

Racism is no doubt widespread in the Cincinnati Police Division. Drawn from the more backward elements in the area—which remains one of the most segregated in the US—they have been encouraged by the reactionary political climate in Cincinnati, which has long been a Republican Party stronghold. It is one of the few cities in the US where a handful of Ku Klux Klan members, protected by the police, publicly erect a cross in the city’s main park each year.

More fundamentally, however, the continued police abuse is bound up with the social tensions that exist in Cincinnati and every American city. Home to Fortune 500 companies like Procter & Gamble, Kroger, and Chiquita Brands International, economic disparity between the richest 5 percent of the population in the Cincinnati area and the poorest 5 percent is second only to the Tampa Bay, Florida area, the worst in the country.

Democratic and Republican officials alike have encouraged the gentrification of working class and minority neighborhoods by tearing down public housing and providing tax breaks and other incentives to wealthy developers, who in turn boost rents beyond the reach of the working poor. At the same time, the authorities have launched a law-and-order crackdown to marginalize and drive the poor out of these same neighborhoods.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact