

19-year-old mourned in Brooklyn

Another fatal police shooting in New York

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Another unprovoked fatal police shooting in New York City has left a working class family grief-stricken and millions of city residents appalled.

The latest victim is Timothy Stansbury, Jr., a 19-year-old, a senior at Thomas Jefferson High School who also worked full time, earning the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour on the 3-10 p.m. shift at a McDonald's restaurant near his home. He lived in the Louis Armstrong Houses, a public housing project in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Stansbury returned home from work on Friday night, January 23, and was visited a short time later by a friend who invited him to a birthday party taking place in an adjoining building. Four buildings share a single roof, which is supposed to be off limits, but is often used as a shortcut between one building and another.

After going to the party, Stansbury and a friend left briefly at about 1 a.m. to get some music. On the way back they were joined by a third friend, and they proceeded to the roof in order to cross over to the building in which the party was taking place.

Stansbury led the way. Meanwhile, two police officers were on the roof, carrying out a regular patrol. Their guns were drawn. Officer Richard Neri, 35 years old, pulled the door open just as Stansbury pushed it from inside.

No words were exchanged, and the police did not identify themselves or offer any warning. Neri pulled the trigger, shooting Stansbury in the chest. The youth staggered, bleeding, down five flights of stairs to the building's lobby where he collapsed. The police summoned an ambulance, but the young man was pronounced dead at 5:45 a.m. at Woodhull Hospital and Medical Center.

Stansbury's parents tried to make sense of what had happened to their son. "They didn't ask any questions,

no 'freeze,' or 'Who are you?' It doesn't make any sense," said his father, Timothy Sr. "It's no justice at all. They don't ask no questions, they just shoot. The young man's mother, Phyllis Clayburne, a school crossing guard, said, "It's ridiculous. We are people. This has got to stop. We can't do what we want. We can't even live in our own neighborhood. They can't just come around and shoot people for no reason."

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the Republican billionaire who took office two years ago, quickly issued an apology and attended a January 30 funeral that drew a crowd of several hundred.

Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly held a press conference within 12 hours of the incident to acknowledge that "there appears to be no justification for the shooting." Kelly added that there would be "an in-depth look at our tactics and training, both for new and veteran officers." The case was also submitted to the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, amid reports that a grand jury could indict the police officer on charges of criminally negligent homicide or second-degree manslaughter.

The media made much of the contrast between the Bloomberg administration's response and that of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani under similar circumstances. In 1999, Giuliani called for withholding judgment after a plainclothes police unit killed Amadou Diallo in a hail of 41 bullets, and then welcomed the acquittal of the cops the following year. There was also the case of Patrick Dorismond, who was shot to death by a plainclothes detective after he angrily rebuffed the cop for approaching him to buy drugs. Giuliani obtained the release of the victim's sealed juvenile police record, and announced that Dorismond was not "an altar boy," in a vicious attempt to sway public opinion in the face of wanton police brutality.

Bloomberg no doubt has a somewhat different style, and he has also learned from the experiences of his predecessor. City officials are worried that another horrific police killing could provoke an explosion of popular anger given the deepening social crisis in New York. The number of homeless has reached new records, and the gap between the rich and poor is wider than ever, with almost no new jobs created in the past year, even as Wall Street celebrates its own recovery with million dollar bonuses.

Timothy Stansbury's family and friends have justifiably called for the prosecution of the officer who took the youth's life. If such a trial ever takes place, there is no doubt that the authorities will pin all of the responsibility on the individual cop, while covering up the more fundamental social issues underlying police violence.

Officer Neri is by all accounts typical of the uniformed personnel of the New York City Police Department, and there was nothing in his record to suggest that he was the most likely to become involved in such a egregious killing. He was not inexperienced, having 11 years on the police force. Moreover, he had never fired a weapon on the job. There were no complaints in his record. And there is no reason to believe he set out to kill a teenager on the night of January 23.

All of this only suggests that the reasons for the fatal encounter in Brooklyn are to be found less in the personal psychology of Neri than in the social pathology of policing in New York City. The police are charged with enforcing a status quo based on immense social inequality, in a city which boasts one of the greatest concentration of millionaires and billionaires, but where at least a third of its children live in poverty.

The cops are recruited and trained to police this social divide, and large numbers see themselves, with good reason, as an occupying force in working class communities. Their typical attitude toward the workers and youth in their midst is a combination of fear, ignorance, hostility and indifference. From here it is not a big step to the panic that led the killers of Amadou Diallo to empty dozens of bullets into an innocent man, and that apparently led Richard Neri to kill Timothy Stansbury without warning.

While residents of neighborhoods like Bedford Stuyvesant want to see a reduction in crime and an

improvement in public safety, this is not the purpose of the demagogic law-and-order drive, personified in New York City in the 1990s by Giuliani. This continuing campaign, backed by Democrats and Republicans alike, has seen the quadrupling of the number of prison inmates in the US. Ultimately it is designed to cover up the social causes of crime, to divert attention from the pressing issues of unemployment, homelessness and related social ills.

The incessant crime crackdowns only encourage cops to consider themselves licensed to shoot first and ask questions later, an attitude perfectly summed up by Patrick Lynch, the president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, in his public comments criticizing the mayor and police commissioner for suggesting the shooting was uncalled for. "The way we brought New York City under control is by police officers being proactive and putting themselves in dangerous positions," Lynch declared. "You have to and must stand by those police officers when you're asking them to go into those situations."

Regardless of their apologies, Bloomberg and the entire political establishment are politically responsible for the death of Timothy Stansbury. Talk of changes in police procedure, such as the suggestion that police be instructed not to have their guns drawn while on roof patrols, will mean little or nothing. The incidents of police violence will continue. The latest statistics show that complaints about police abuse to the city's Civilian Complaint Review Board have risen from 4,113 in 2001, to 4,228 in 2002 and 4,616 last year.



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