A tragedy born of poverty and unemployment

Fired transit worker kills two supervisors at New York City rail yard

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A fired New York City transit worker, Darryl Dinkins, 39, was arrested by the police near his home in Brooklyn last Saturday and charged with the death of two of his former supervisors. The two men were both found dead at 7: 40 a.m. February 27 in a portable trailer at the Coney Island rail yard. Luigi Sedita, 61, was found face down with two bullets lodged in his right hip and side. Clive Patterson, 46, was found lying nearby in a pool of blood, also with two bullet wounds, one to the head.

The two men supervised car cleaners on the midnight shift at the 75-acre rail yard in Brooklyn, where trains are cleaned and repaired. A co-worker reported that he last saw them alive some time after 4:20 AM. A security guard discovered their bodies about three-and-a-half hours later.

Dinkins had worked as a car cleaner for almost five years before being fired last October for insubordination. He had been brought up on disciplinary charges based upon Sedita's and Patterson's report that they had found Dinkins and another cleaner playing dominoes during work hours. Sedita also claimed that on the same day at the end of shift Dinkins cursed at him and spit in his face. Dinkins disputed Sedita's version of events, and pointed out that the supervisor did not formally charge him until a number of days later. There had apparently been many previous conflicts between these two men.

Dinkins, who is black, also accused Sedita, who is white, of racial discrimination. The other murdered supervisor, Patterson, who also disciplined Dinkins, is black.

Dinkins was found by the police near his home in Crown Heights, drunk and crying, just hours after the slayings. While in custody, he attempted to commit suicide after confessing to the cops. He tried to hang himself by using his shirt as a noose in a holding cell at about 5:40 Saturday morning. His attempt failed when two police officers intervened. He was then transferred to Coney Island Hospital for psychiatric evaluation.

Predictably, there has been no attempt by the media to examine the social context in which this horrific double-killing took place. It has been reported as just another crime story, with Dinkins at times referred to simply as an ex-convict.

But family members and some of his co-workers described Dinkins as friendly and easy-going. One co-worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Dinkins told him he was doing construction work during the day, as well as working for transit during the midnight hours, in order to support his wife, Norah, and his two children—a boy, 15, and a girl, 11.

Car cleaners are among the lowest paid and most exploited of New York City transit workers. Their jobs have long been among the most threatened.

The New York City Transit Authority has opened up the job to the city's "Work Experience Program," under which welfare recipients are forced to clean subway cars in return for their benefits. The purpose of the program is to force the long-term unemployed off the welfare rolls and into the low-wage labor market. It has succeeded in slashing the number of New York City welfare recipients from 1.1 million in 1994 to 420,000 in 2003. Part of the secret to this success is abusive treatment by supervisors on the job, forcing the recipients to quit and seek work elsewhere.

Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents the 34,000 New York City transit workers, has accommodated itself to this slave-labor program and the resulting loss of its own members' jobs. It accepted the introduction of the so-called WEPs in 1999 in return for a modest pay hike for cleaners and the promotion of a few

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high seniority workers to supervisory positions, which require them to boss the welfare recipients. In 2002, the union bureaucracy agreed to continue this arrangement.

Dinkins was reportedly looking to the union to defend him from being fired, but was bitterly disappointed. According to one press report, a union lawyer told him that there was no way for him to get his job back.

There is a widespread feeling of disgust among transit workers, and particularly the car cleaners, over what they say is constant harassment and disrespect from management. Many workers at Coney Island yard expressed the opinion that, while appalled by Dinkins' actions, they were not surprised that such a tragedy had occurred. They were surprised, in fact, that something similar had not happened before.

Dinkins lost his job at a time when it is increasingly difficult for workers—especially black men—to obtain employment in New York City. The city has lost more than 200,000 jobs since 2001. A recently released study by the Community Service Society, a nonprofit social welfare advocacy group, found that in 2003 almost half of the city's black men were without work.

The CSS reported that among black males aged 16 to 64, only 51.8 percent had a job. This compares to 75.7 percent for white men, 65.7 percent for Hispanic men, and 57.1 percent for black women. This data, obtained from the Federal Bureau of Labor, paints a far more grim—and realistic—picture than the official unemployment rates, which do not include workers who have given up actively looking for work. The Community Service Society report examined the total number of workers employed compared to the number that were able to work.

Experts have said this study is consistent with results in other Northern and Midwestern cities. Mark Levitan, the author of the report, has said that this is the lowest employment ratio that he has seen since he began conducting such studies in 1979.

The Center for Employment Opportunities has reported that its ability to find employment for men and women with criminal records has dropped from 65 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2003. Dinkins had a minor criminal record, having been arrested and pleaded guilty in 1991 to a weapons possession charge, for which he spent one day in jail. In 1994, he was charged with driving while intoxicated, but received no jail time.

Under the current economic conditions, having been fired from a civil service job, Dinkins was confronting a situation in which he was all but unemployable.

The threat of unemployment is compounded by the vast social chasm that exists between wealth and poverty in New York City. While boasting the largest concentration of millionaires and billionaires in the world, the city reports that some 30,000 men, women and children crowd every night into its homeless shelters, while thousands more survive on the streets. One fifth of the city's population subsists below the federal poverty level, including one third of its children.

For those who lose their job, it is possible to fall very far, very fast.

The immense social tensions that exist in New York City are only part of a wider, national phenomenon, in a society in which millions find themselves on the brink of social catastrophe. The threat of unemployment, the pressure of working longer hours and on multiple jobs to make ends meet, and the contempt shown by the government and the ruling elite for those who become unemployed or fall into poverty, all contribute to a toxic atmosphere in which workplace violence is a daily fact of life.

With a two-party political system that provides no means for working people to express their concerns, much less combat worsening conditions, and a bureaucratized labor movement that functions as the junior partner of big business, suppressed social tensions repeatedly erupt in the malignant form of individual violence.

The desperate act of Daryl Dinkins is only the latest in a long line of multiple murders carried out by workers who have become mentally and emotionally unhinged by the loss of a job or by grievances against supervisors or fellow workers.

Classified by the National Centers for Disease Control as a national epidemic, workplace violence in the US affects some 2 million victims annually, claiming, on average, 800 lives. It is the fastest growing cause of homicides. While the great majority of killings and assaults on the job are the result of robberies or similar crimes, roughly 15 percent of all work-related killings are committed by disgruntled workers or ex-employees.

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