Klansman arrested in 1964 killings of civil rights workers

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More than 40 years after the killings of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi—an atrocity that made the town a symbol of racism in the bitter struggle to dismantle Jim Crow segregation in the United States—the first murder charge has been brought in the case. A longtime leader of the Ku Klux Klan, Edgar Ray Killen, now 79 years old, was arrested early this month. Killen has been freed on $250,000 bail, and his trial has been set for March 28.

Killen's name is well known in connection with the murders of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney, which took place on the night of June 21, 1964. In 1967, he was among 18 Klansmen who were tried on federal civil rights charges, after local and state authorities refused to take action. Seven of these defendants were convicted and received light sentences, ranging from 3 years to 10 years. None served more than six years, and Killen himself was released when the jury deadlocked 11-to-1 for conviction.

The circumstances of the killings were brought out at the 1967 trial, with further details added through interviews and revelations from the surviving murderers in subsequent decades. Schwerner was the main target in the murders. A native of New York City and a 24-year-old graduate of Cornell University, he had arrived in Mississippi with his wife Rita in January of that year, and had been working for the Congress of Racial Equality.

Chaney, a 21-year-old black man from Meridian, Mississippi, had been working closely with Schwerner.

Goodman, 20 years old and a student at Queens College, came from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and had arrived in Mississippi only a day before he was killed.

The three men were among the many participants in Freedom Summer, a voter registration drive that brought together black and white workers and youth from around the country to challenge the racist exclusion of black voters.

The three civil rights workers were arrested for "speeding" on the afternoon of June 21. While they were held in the sheriff's office in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price relayed information on them to local Klansmen, including Killen, who organized a group for the purpose of following and killing them when they were released from jail later that night.

Chaney was beaten to death and Schwerner and Goodman were shot in the chest. Their bodies were buried under a dam on a nearby farm, and not discovered until six weeks later.

After the 1967 trials, the case of the murdered civil rights workers languished for decades. It was reopened in 1999, after a Jackson, Mississippi, newspaper published excerpts from a secret interview with Sam Bowers, a Klan leader who had been found guilty in the federal trial and had later been sentenced to life in prison in connection with another civil rights murder, the 1966 firebombing that took the life of Vernon Dahmer.

In 2004, a grand jury reportedly heard accounts from witnesses and individuals who had direct knowledge of the 1964 murders. Additional evidence for the long-delayed prosecution was found in the files of the State Sovereignty Commission, founded in 1956 to spy on opponents of racism and segregation. The commission, before it was abolished in 1977, gathered evidence on 87,000 individuals, and included information on the murders of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney. These files were only opened in recent years.

The indictment of Klansman Killen is one of a series of high-profile cases which have been prosecuted or reopened in the past decade. These include the 1994 trial and conviction of Byron de la Beckwith in the 1963 assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, the 1998 conviction of Sam Bowers in the above-mentioned killing of Vernon Dahmer, and the 2002 conviction of Bobby Frank Cherry in the killing of four young girls in the infamous 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing.

While the new prosecution makes possible a fuller historical accounting and a measure of justice for those who gave their lives fighting for equality, the latest turn in this case highlights the extent to which this struggle continues today, although under transformed conditions.

The year 1964 was in many respects a turning point in the struggle against Jim Crow. The Philadelphia, Mississippi,

murders helped to galvanize support for both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

While Jim Crow was ended, the social and economic system of capitalism that gave rise to it endured. Some of the relatives of the civil rights martyrs alluded to the continuation of social inequality in remarks to the media in the past week. James Chaney's mother, Fannie Lee Chaney, who now lives in New Jersey, told the *New York Times* that she had visited James's grave in Meridian last July. "The black people, I see, got a little nicer houses and got a little better jobs in some places," she said. "That's all I see changed."

Stephen Schwerner, a retired college professor and Michael Schwerner's brother, referred to a course he once taught on the civil rights movement. "What's important for students to realize is that this was not ancient history, people still alive were involved in this, and that we still have a long, long way to go."

The political compromise that ended Jim Crow is symbolized in the fact that so many of the Klansmen involved in the 1964 killings either received light sentences or got off scot-free. Killen has lived for the past four decades as a sawmill operator and a fundamentalist preacher. While denying involvement in the killings, he has openly defended them. In an interview with the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* last year, he said of the killers of the civil rights workers, "I'm not going to say they were wrong. I believe in self-defense."

This issue transcends the individual fate of these killers. Much has changed since 1964, but much also remains essentially the same. A system of unequal justice, reflected in prison and parole statistics and the permanent voting disenfranchisement of convicted felons, endures today not only in the South, but throughout the United States.

The political descendants of the politicians and police who conspired in the killings of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney continue to wield political power today. In 1964, the racists played their role primarily through the Democratic Party. For decades, Southern Democratic officials were granted national political influence out of all proportion to their numbers, as a means of dividing the working class and defending the interests of the ruling elite.

In the 1960s, however, the Southern Dixiecrats began deserting the Democratic Party for the Republican Party, which sought to recruit them in order to establish a base for itself in the South. Today, their political heirs are a key component of the ultra-right forces in the Republican Party that play a leading role within the Bush White House.

These elements do not rule in the old way, and they are usually careful to declaim hypocritically on the importance of equal rights—while signaling their support for racism. Ronald Reagan perfected this technique. As the place to launch his 1980 presidential campaign, he chose—of all the cities and towns across the United States—Philadelphia, Mississippi, in order to show his "understanding" of Southern "traditions." He followed this with demagogic attacks on "welfare cheats," along with other code words and slogans designed to pit employed against unemployed, and white against black workers.

Occasionally, some political figure will step over the line. When then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi uttered impolitic comments lauding 1948 Dixiecrat presidential candidate Strom Thurmond on his 100th birthday two years ago, Lott paid for his indiscretion with the loss of his leadership post.

Jim Crow is no more, and incidents of racist terror are not the commonplace they were in earlier times, but racial inequality and discrimination remain, continuing to fulfill the needs of the profit system. The Southern political establishment continues to function as a bulwark of reaction. A thin layer of the black upper-middle-class, along with political functionaries, has benefited from the dismantling of certain racial barriers, but most workers have not.

Today, the struggle to defend democratic rights and achieve social equality, the cause that Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney fought and died for, raises the need more urgently than ever to unite the working class against the governing plutocracy in a political struggle against the profit system and for socialism.