

US: Students protest juvenile's death in Florida "boot camp"

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On April 21, thousands of students and other young people from around Florida descended on the state capitol building to protest the death of Martin Lee Anderson, a 14-year-old African-American boy who died in a Florida Boot camp one day after being beaten and choked by guards. The march on the capitol was the culmination of weeklong protests that included an overnight sit-in outside Florida Governor Jeb Bush's office.

The protesters chanted, "Justice delayed is justice denied" and carried pictures of Anderson in his funeral casket with captions that read, "This is what democracy looks like."

Martin Lee Anderson was sent to a boot camp in the Florida panhandle after he was caught joyriding in his grandmother's car and then violated the terms of his probation. This boot camp was run by the Bay County sheriff's office and operated under contract with Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice. A January 11 article in the *Miami Herald* reports that the DJJ operates about six such camps throughout the state of Florida, all run by county sheriffs' offices.

The events surrounding Martin Anderson's death give a glimpse into what occurs in these "correctional" facilities. A mere three hours after being admitted into the Bay City boot camp, Anderson was "disciplined" after he became exhausted during an orientation drill and stopped running. He was not even at the facility long enough to eat lunch before being subjected to a merciless beating that was caught on the camp's security cameras. The footage, which received widespread publicity, shows numerous guards—up to eight at one point—punching Anderson with closed fists, applying wristlocks and other holds, and kicking or kneeling him repeatedly. The tape shows that this continued for a period of over 40 minutes. Anderson

appears limp throughout the tape.

After Anderson complained of breathing difficulties, he collapsed and was taken to a hospital where he died the next day.

Outrage over the event only increased after the initial autopsy results were made public. Dr. Charles Siebert, the Bay County medical examiner, performed the first autopsy on Martin Anderson and concluded that the death occurred by natural causes related to a sickle cell trait, a usually benign blood disorder. This seemingly absurd conclusion prompted accusations of a cover-up.

A second autopsy, performed by Dr. Michael Baden at the request of the Anderson family, concluded that Martin Anderson likely asphyxiated, pointing to a section of the videotape where it appears that the guard's hands were covering Anderson's mouth and his nose was blocked by ammonia.

The death of Martin Anderson is not an isolated occurrence. There have been 35 deaths in boot camps since 1983 in addition to thousands of injuries inflicted by guards, ranging from broken bones to heat exhaustion.

As the WSWWS reported in July 2001, "Juvenile boot camps first came into existence in the mid-1980s, during the Reagan years, when officials in Georgia and Louisiana experimented with placing teenage boys in military-type settings. The practice caught on with politicians anxious to appear 'tough on crime.'"

These camps, designed to "break the spirit" of troubled teens so that they return home a "good soldier," are symptomatic of the growing brutalization and militarization of American society.

An article by the *Miami Herald* (April 2, 2006) discloses the contents of a Florida Department of Juvenile Justice report documenting use-of-force incidents at the Panama City boot camp where

Anderson died. Since January 2003, force was used against juveniles 180 times; only eight of these instances were for hitting guards, fighting or trying to escape. In fact, the article states that “the overwhelming majority of the youths were subjected to takedowns, hammer-fist blows and knee strikes for: being unwilling or unable to perform rigorous exercises, exercising without sufficient ‘motivation,’ being ‘insolent’ with guards, speaking without permission, breathing heavily, or ‘tensing’ themselves.” The article also states that “on Christmas Day 2004, one boy was disciplined for smiling.”

The *Miami Herald* has also documented the ineffectiveness of such programs. In a January 11, 2006 article, the *Herald* exposes the track record of the boot camps, stating that “DJJ’s records show about 62 percent of the youth who graduate from one of the state’s boot camps are arrested again for some type of offense—a recidivism rate experts call very high.” On January 29, 2006, the *Washington Post* cited a 2004 statement by the National Institutes of Health that concludes boot camp programs “do not work and there is some evidence that they may make the problem worse. Indeed, some young people leave these programs with post-traumatic stress disorder and exacerbations of their original problems.”

With the attention that the Anderson tragedy has brought to Florida’s juvenile justice system, there have been calls from legislators to shut down all of the state’s remaining boot camp facilities. Governor Jeb Bush has so far refused to do so, stating on April 20 that the boot camp programs have “yielded a good result.” The next day, Bush’s juvenile justice secretary, Anthony Schembri, confirmed the administration’s position, saying about the five remaining boot camps, “I think the remainder are good options that we can use for certain kids.”

The reaction among layers of students and workers has been one of outrage. Protests began Wednesday morning when a group of students took over the foyer of Governor Jeb Bush’s office demanding a meeting with the governor, who was on a trip in the Middle East at the time. The students, who came from Florida State University, Florida A&M University and Tallahassee Community College, refused to meet with the lieutenant governor and instead stayed overnight at the governor’s office. They advanced a list of demands

that included revoking the license of the medical examiner that performed the first autopsy, arresting the guards caught on the tape beating Anderson, and giving an apology to Anderson’s family.

Governor Bush refused the student’s demands, saying that “the list of demands were [sic] asking for things that I don’t have the constitutional power to carry out.” This excuse stands in stark contrast to the actions taken by Jeb Bush during the Terri Schiavo incident. In that case, he showed no hesitancy in intervening to authorize the resumption of life-support measures, including inserting a feeding tube into Terri Schiavo’s body; violating such constitutional principles such as the separation of church and state, separation of powers and Terri’s due process rights. One fundamental difference here is that the death of Anderson, who came from a black working class family, is not being promoted by the religious right as a so-called “pro-life” issue.

The student sit-in continued throughout the day on Thursday, with many students skipping final exams to stay at the governor’s office. On Friday, thousands showed up for a student-organized march from the civic center to the capitol building. The march came just a few hours after the resignation of Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Guy Tunnell following revelations by the *Miami Herald* that he had compared Illinois Senator Barack Obama to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Jesse Jackson to the outlaw Jesse James at a department head meeting. Tunnell was the former Bay County Sheriff and had started the boot camp where Anderson died in. He was in charge of investigating the death until Governor Bush appointed a special prosecutor to replace him.

The protesters assembled on the steps of the capitol building, demanding that the results of the second autopsy be released, and shouted, “we’ll be back if you don’t act.”



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