

New York police kill unarmed man, wound two others

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On Saturday, November 25, a few hours before his wedding, Sean Bell, 23, was shot to death in his car by undercover New York City police officers in Jamaica, Queens. Police bullets struck the former UPS driver twice, once in the neck and once in the arm.

Police fired 50 rounds from semi-automatic weapons even though Bell and his two companions in the car were unarmed. One of them, Joseph Guzman, 31, remains in critical condition with 11 bullet wounds to the neck and leg.

According to the *New York Post*, Guzman was handcuffed to his bed after the shooting and was released from the restraints only after press inquiries. The other passenger, Trent Benefield, 23, received multiple wounds in the assault and was handcuffed and shackled to his hospital bed.

The three men had left the Kalua Cabaret nearby at about 4:00 a.m. after attending a bachelor party for Bell. Undercover detectives had been in the bar at the time, followed the trio out, and allegedly heard Guzman refer to a gun during a minor altercation.

After the three had gotten into the car, another detective confronted them, put his foot on the car, and pointed his weapon at them, ordering them out of the vehicle. Bell reportedly drove his car at the officer, slightly injuring him, and then rammed a white, unmarked police van that had come around the corner.

The detective fired 11 rounds at the car, and another detective who had jumped out of the van fired 31 rounds, indicating that he reloaded. Three other officers also fired their weapons.

The first cop had allegedly shouted into his walkie-talkie, "It's getting hot on Liverpool! For real, I think there's a gun!" In other words, the mere suspicion of a weapon was the cause of disproportionate force on the part of the police.

Friends of the three victims argue that the men mistook the police for robbers. According to Trini Wright, a dancer at the club who witnessed the incident, the police did not identify themselves before they opened fire. Speaking to the *Daily News* she said, "The minivan came around the corner and smashed into their car. And they [the cops] jumped out shooting. No 'stop.' No 'freeze.' No nothing."

Another witness, China Flores, quoted in the *Daily News*, said that it was only after the shooting had started that the police identified themselves. When Trent Benefield staggered out of the car, she said, "He's shouting, 'Stop shooting at me! Stop shooting at me!'" According to Flores, police officers continued firing at Benefield even after he lay down on the ground.

Police Commissioner Richard Kelly announced at a news conference on Sunday that there was a grand jury investigation into the incident, and Queens District Attorney Richard Brown assured everyone of a "full, fair and complete investigation."

The murder is reminiscent of the police killing of Amadou Diallo in 1999, who had 41 bullets fired at him after he reached for his wallet. The killing was presented variously as a panicky aberration on the part of the police, or as a function of the law-and-order fanaticism of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani. No one was ever convicted of the crime.

But time and again police killings like this take place in New York. In one case in 2004, police shot 19-year-old Timothy Stansbury without warning as he was returning home from a birthday party.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted about the incident at the time, "The reasons for the fatal encounter in Brooklyn are to be found less in the personal psychology of Neri [the police officer who

killed Stansbury] 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 concentrations 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...”

In the two years since these lines were written, the social divide in New York has only grown larger. According to a recent report in the *New York Times*, the city’s 280,000 financial employees saw their incomes—in just three years—rise from an average of about \$5,000 a week to over \$8,000, a figure that accounts for more than half the total wages paid in Manhattan.

The killing of Sean Bell has sparked outrage throughout the city. On Sunday hundreds attended a vigil and rally in Queens to protest the shootings. The *New York Post* quoted Denise Ford, Bell’s mother, as saying, “Something needs to be done about them. They do things and get away with it. It’s not right or fair to us. Something needs to be done and I’m going to start.” Another protest is planned in front of police headquarters on December 6.

Republican billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg phoned Democratic Party notables, including US Representative Charles Rangel and former mayor David Dinkins, from his vacation house in Bermuda following the shootings, undoubtedly to ask them to control the situation, and in a show of concern meant to distinguish himself from his predecessor Guiliani.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, typically, held two press conferences in front of the hospital where the victims had been taken, but said nothing about the social causes of this crime, which would require raising the responsibility of the Democratic Party, of which he is a leading member.

Bloomberg addressed a news conference Monday afternoon at City Hall following a meeting with elected

officials and religious leaders from the area where the three men lived. Stopping short of placing blame, the mayor described the events surrounding the shooting as “unacceptable,” “inexplicable” and “deeply disturbing.”

While describing the three men as “victims” and stating, “It sounds to me like excessive force was used” against them, Bloomberg expressed confidence in Commissioner Kelly and said he expected the police chief to keep his job for the rest of his mayoral term.

The *Post* did its best to depict the victims as criminals, referring to sealed juvenile records. Its web site posted an advertising banner for police recruitment above an article on the killing. The *Daily News* gave empty tributes to the groom who had been gunned down on his wedding day, exploiting the grief of his bride and family. The *New York Times* offered an explanation of “contagious shooting” by policemen. The police, by this reasoning, are scared too.

Describing the behavior of the police as if taking place in a vacuum, the media and political establishment make no reference to the social crisis in the city. Yet disregard for human life, fear, suspicion and contempt mingled together on Saturday morning because the police force encounters an increasingly impoverished and angry population.



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