

Thousands march in New York to protest police killing

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19 December 2006

Thousands of people marched down New York's Fifth Avenue and across 34th Street on Saturday, nine days before Christmas and one of the busiest shopping days of the year, to protest the police murder of Sean Bell and the serious wounding of two others in the borough of Queens on November 25.

The turnout for what was billed as a silent protest clearly exceeded the expectations of the police, who had set aside barricades to confine the marchers to one traffic lane. The throng quickly took over nearly the entire width of both Fifth Avenue and 34th Street, passing upscale stores like Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue, along with St. Patrick's Cathedral and Rockefeller Center, ending outside of Macy's.

Democratic Party politician Al Sharpton led the march, walking beside Nicole Paultre-Bell, who has legally adopted the name of her fiancé and the father of their two children. Abner Louima, the Haitian immigrant who was brutally sodomized in a Brooklyn police station house nine years ago, was also present, as were Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, which endorsed the protest; Roger Toussaint, president of Transport Workers Union Local 100; NAACP officials; singer Harry Belafonte; and some prominent Democrats, including longtime Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel.

Bell was killed when six undercover cops fired 50 bullets at his car just as he was leaving his bachelor party at Club Kalua in Jamaica, Queens. Bell was to be married later that day. Wounded in the shooting were his friends Joseph Guzman and Trent Benefield. The three men were unarmed and guilty of nothing other than being in the wrong place at a time when police were conducting an undercover investigation. Benefield came to Saturday's march in a wheelchair, while Guzman remains in the hospital.

Since this latest police shooting, the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg has made various public comments designed to appease public anger, and newspaper editorials and black officials and public figures have favorably compared him to his predecessor, Rudolph Giuliani. The fact remains, however, that three weeks later there are no indications of how long Queens District Attorney Richard Brown intends to take in investigating the incident. In nearly every other police shooting, after months of waiting, no charges have been brought or, as in the case of Amadou Diallo, killed in a hail of 41 bullets in February 1999, the police have been acquitted of all charges.

The police themselves have spent the weeks since the shooting seeking to find some reason to justify the murder. They have looked for a mysterious "fourth man," someone who had allegedly fled the scene with a weapon. Police scoured the area and found no gun. On November 29 they made four arrests in the area where the three victims had been raised, arrests that were made "in conjunction" with the shooting, according to Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly.

The police held, but did not arrest, Jean Nelson, who was also present at the bachelor party, and who was tagged by the media as the "fourth man." Nelson and another witness to the shooting, Lorenzo Kindred, have both charged the police with harassment and detaining them without charges in the wake of the incident.

Saturday's protest clearly reflected the broad outrage over both the shooting as well as the conditions of general poverty and police repression in the city's minority and poor working class neighborhoods.

The Democratic Party officials and trade union bureaucrats who led the march, however, are determined to divert this anger back into the existing political setup. They insist that the problems can be

fixed with better police training or other tinkering with the status quo.

Signs printed by Sharpton's National Action Network for the protest declared, "Improve Police-Community Relations Now." At a press conference after the march Sharpton claimed that progress had been made, and suggested that the incoming Democratic-controlled Congress could help. "There needs to be Congressional hearings to deal with how we have federal oversight on a lot of these [police] departments that keep having these cases of excessive force," Sharpton said.

Other proposals have included the call for a special prosecutor to investigate the shooting, which has been vociferously opposed by the Queens DA and the entire political establishment. Others have claimed that the shooting was the result of poor training, with some of the officers involved allegedly missing a firearms training cycle. Police Commissioner Kelly responded to this by announcing that the officers involved had had sufficient firearms training this year. The most "radical" of the demands raised so far has been for the resignation of Kelly, who has nevertheless retained the full support of the mayor and the city's media and political elite.

Underlying the police violence is the social divide in New York, deep and growing. Conditions in the poorest neighborhoods remain akin to police occupation. This is what sets the stage for trigger happy or panicky police shooting first and asking questions later, leaving innocent workers and youth dead, their loved ones in mourning, and millions appalled and enraged.



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