

Chicago youth violence: An indictment of the US Democratic Party

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In recent months there has been a string of violence, mostly gang-related, which has claimed the lives of dozens of youth in Chicago, Illinois. In a single weekend in April, 36 people were shot, and nine died of their injuries. Since last September, 24 Chicago public school students have been killed in such shootings.

The victims of these tragedies have been working class and minority youth, including many who were innocent bystanders.

Last March, for example, Chavez Clarke became the 20th Chicago public school student killed up to that point. Chavez was 18 years old and a student at the Simeon Career Academy. He had hoped either to attend an apprentice school for drafting and architecture or train as a truck driver. He was caught in gang crossfire as he walked down the street with his twin brother, Travez. Two students from Dunbar Career Academy, aged 17 and 19, were ultimately charged by police in Chavez's murder.

Another youth, 16-year-old John Mendoza, was found bludgeoned to death in an alley. Although his family insisted he wasn't in a gang—and had recently changed schools to avoid gang conflict—two funeral homes, fearing retaliation, refused to provide arrangements suitable for the family. Another would only hold an abbreviated morning wake if an additional charge of \$2,000 for security was paid. Only after Jose Mendoza, the boy's father, contacted a friend in the funeral business was the family able to arrange a service.

The tragic loss of these young people has provoked shock and anger. Families who have lost loved ones have made sincere appeals to end the violence, while others have volunteered to escort children to school.

The political establishment in the city, however, has been unable to offer any serious solution. Instead, its only answer has been greater law-and-order repression including proposals—backed by Mayor Richard Daley—to arm the entire 13,500-strong Chicago Police Department with military-style assault weapons.

At a City Hall news conference, Police Department Superintendent Jody Weis proposed flooding south and west side neighborhoods known for gang activity with SWAT and Targeted Response Units in full battle dress, with aerial support from police helicopters.

The local media have already dubbed such a show of force as a “surge,” in reference to the troop surge in Iraq.

Chicago is not the only city in which the methods of the Iraq war are being brought home. In Washington, DC, police chief Cathy Lanier announced Wednesday that in order to stop violent crime

and drugs a checkpoint would be set up in the city's Trinidad neighborhood to stop cars, check identifications and exclude people the police decided did not have a “legitimate purpose” in the area. “Welcome to Baghdad, DC,” the local head of the American Civil Liberties Union said of the so-called “Neighborhood Safety Zone” plan.

The conditions for implementing such antidemocratic measures in Chicago have been prepared by sensationalist media coverage. Nowhere, however, can one find any serious discussion in the media or the political establishment of the social roots of the problem.

In an oblique reference to the desperate conditions confronting the youth involved in such violence, Mayor Daley, said, “When the killing is done, you still don't have a job, in fact, it greatly decreases the chances that you ever ... will have a job.”

Needless to say, the mayor offered nothing to alleviate such conditions. This summer the city is only offering 18,000 summer jobs to the hundreds of thousands who will be searching for one. Last summer teen unemployment reached 34.5 percent, the worst on record since World War II, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. The situation will be worse this summer, the center says.

Youth violence cannot be separated from the miserable prospects young people face in America's third largest city, and the unprecedented social polarization that has taken place there.

Like Detroit and other Midwest “rustbelt” cities, Chicago has been decimated by decades of deindustrialization, losing hundreds of thousands of steel, trucking, railroad, meatpacking and other relatively decent-paying jobs since 1979. From 2000 to 2005 alone, the region lost 22.2 percent of its manufacturing jobs. The official jobless rate, which grossly underestimates the real situation, rose to 5.4 percent in April, up from 4.7 percent last year.

Nearly 600,000 people—or one out of every six residents—live in poverty. The poverty rate for children is one out of three. Most poor residents live in extreme poverty, according to the Heartland Alliance, with an annual income less than half the government's official poverty line.

An astounding 85 percent of Chicago public school students live in poverty, according to federal statistics. The graduation rate from these under-funded and overcrowded schools is only 51.5 percent, according to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

These conditions are an indictment of the capitalist system and

the Democratic Party, which has controlled City Hall in Chicago since 1931. The pro-business policies of Daley, who has been mayor since 1989, are the culmination of a long shift to the right by big city mayors from the Democratic Party, which abandoned liberal social policies in the late 1970s and fully embraced the “free market.”

A recent study on the city’s gangs by the Justice Policy Institute noted that violence had “exacerbated in Chicago during the mid-1990s when the public housing authority shifted millions of dollars from needed maintenance and renovation of the city’s high-rise projects to finance a drug enforcement campaign involving massive gang sweeps.”

“When that strategy proved largely fruitless,” the institute noted, “the city began to demolish the projects, forcing more than a hundred thousand tenants to move. Instead of building new housing for them, the housing authority gave displaced tenants rent vouchers. Scattered relocation to other segregated, high-crime areas of the city dislocated people from long-established social networks and increased friction and violence among Chicago gangs.”

The leveling of huge public housing projects like the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini-Green was carried out under the Clinton administration. The administration claimed that public housing, welfare programs and the “cycle of dependency”—not the lack of decent jobs, decaying schools and other forms of social neglect—were the driving forces for crime and drugs. On this basis, the Democrats and Republicans gutted federal welfare programs, privatized large sections of public housing and, at the same time, increased police repression and incarceration rates.

The highly publicized plans to provide successful “mentors” to displaced public housing residents in “mixed income” neighborhoods—which include condominiums selling at the market rate of \$500,000 or more—have proven a farce. Only one-third of the affordable housing units at Cabrini-Green were replaced, and the housing agency used tightened restrictions—including the legal records of family members—to exclude even more from public housing.

Much of this was designed to push poor people out of the city center to make way for the housing boom and the gentrification of working class neighborhoods. In addition to reserving the most exclusive reserves for the rich, better housing went to relatively well-paid professional workers, while poorly paid service, entertainment and retail workers—in many cases disproportionately African-American and Hispanic—were squeezed into poorer and poorer areas.

Participation in gang violence is an expression of alienation and demoralization of layers of youth who are responding to a sense that there is no longer any room for them in the city. This sentiment is reinforced by massive police presence aimed at excluding them from better-off areas of the city and the destruction of recreation, education and other vitally needed social programs.

That some young people engage in self-destructive activity, however, is also function of the failure of the trade union and civil rights establishment, which offers youth no perspective for struggle and improvement of their conditions. The trade union bureaucracy has overseen the shutdown of basic industry and the

decimation of workers’ living standards, while enriching itself through labor-management collaboration. Sections of minority workers who, along with the working class as a whole, had in an earlier period won improved living standards through trade union struggles, have seen virtually all of it disappear, while their sons and daughters are faring even worse.

Then there is the civil rights establishment, including such figures as Jesse Jackson, which long ago abandoned any struggle to seriously improve the conditions of the working class. Instead, in the name of “racial equality,” they have concentrated on integrating themselves into the ranks of the corporate and political elite.

In this regard, mention must be made of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama, who has pointed to the 1984 election of Harold Washington, the city’s first black mayor, as a key motivating factor for his entry into political life. Washington, like his white counterparts in the Democratic Party, was a loyal defender of the capitalist system who carried out regressive policies that contributed to the social catastrophe confronting young people and workers in the city.

Obama himself was elected state senator from Chicago and then US Senator from Illinois during a period when tens of thousands lost their jobs and social programs were being cut. He is deeply integrated into the Cook County Democratic Party, the corrupt political machine that has long dominated Chicago politics.

Obama used the recent media attention on violence in the city to bolster his “law and order” credentials, claiming that the shooting could be curtailed by restoring funding for community policing. “Additional police improves public safety,” he said. “We’ve got to help local communities put more police on the streets.” He also suggested that lack of parental guidance and moral upbringing could be responsible, saying, “Children have to be taught right and wrong and violence isn’t a way to resolve problems.”

Obama made a perfunctory reference to poor conditions facing young people in the city. However, he has made it clear that, if elected, urban policy would not involve any sharp increases in taxation on corporations and the wealthy or a massive public expenditure to eradicate poverty and provide a decent future to working class youth.



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