

Canadian media covers up the social roots of the Montreal riot

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20 August 2008

In the wake of the riot that erupted earlier this month in the north end of Montreal after the police shooting of an unarmed 18-year-old immigrant from Honduras, the big business media are trying to whitewash the killing and cover up the social roots of the underlying repression of minority youth.

André Pratte, chief editor of the Montreal daily *La Presse*, commented Saturday “no one can say today whether the police officers committed a tragic blunder or if they were acting in legitimate self-defense.” A few days earlier, an editorial in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* asserted, “The circumstances around the fatal shooting ... remain murky.”

Those claims fly in the face of the eyewitness accounts of the fatal event, all of which paint a clear, consistent picture of what took place.

The evening of the shooting, Fredy Villanueva was playing dice in a public park with his brother Dany Villanueva and some friends when they were approached by two Montreal police agents, who proceeded to arrest Dany for no apparent reason. When Fredy protested the arbitrary arrest of his brother, one of the cops drew out his gun and fired four shots, killing Fredy and injuring two of his friends, Denis Méas and Jeffrey Sagor Metellus.

Hours after the shooting, police spokesmen began circulating a totally different version of the events, claiming the two officers were surrendered by up to twenty people. “At a certain point,” according to a police press release, “a great number of individuals rushed toward the police agents and attacked them. One of the police agents then opened fire toward the suspects, hitting three of them.”

Samuel Meideiros, 18, was skateboarding nearby when he saw the police pair approach the group of youth. “I don’t know what ran through the mind of the

police agents, but it is really unfair,” he said. “They were six. One can’t know for sure what the young man could have done or said, but it doesn’t matter. They were not twenty, and they didn’t grab the police agents.”

Claude Laguerre, one of the young people involved in the incident, told the Montreal *Gazette* that no one in the group was armed nor made physical contact with the police agents. “We were six guys and two girls. We approached, but we didn’t touch them.” Laguerre said the officers became aggressive within thirty seconds of getting out of their car. “They didn’t ask (our) names, they just got aggressive,” said Laguerre, who said the policeman fired without any warning. He added that after the police agent shot, he continued to point his gun at the group.

In a TV interview, Dany Villanueva gave a detailed account of the police killing of his brother. “There was a game of dice. We were having fun, myself, my brother and his friends ... A police car emerged behind us. We were in the middle [of the park], we moved back. The police agent came right at me and told me: ‘I saw you play dice, come here’. He wanted to arrest me... I had initially maintained a distance from him, then I got closer. He grabbed my hand, he wanted to handcuff me. I said, ‘Why are you doing this? I didn’t do anything wrong.’ He was pressing hard. At a certain point, my arm began to hurt. I was also struggling to straighten up my arm. The other police agent came and they threw me on the hood of the car. I managed to get up. The police agent took me by the neck and tripped me up. It’s at this point that my brother came. He said, ‘What are you doing, let go of my brother. Why are you doing this?’ And then, I just heard gun shots. I saw my brother down on the ground.”

Government officials have refused to call a public

inquiry on the police shooting of Fredy Villanueva and no disciplinary action has been taken against the police agents responsible for his death. A bogus internal investigation was handed over to the provincial police force, the Sûreté du Québec. Its aim is to whitewash the two Montreal cops involved and the city's police force as a whole. "I don't even know what progress the investigation has made, what is going on, nothing," said Patricia Villanueva, the sister of the young victim and spokesperson for the family.

There is also an attempt by the ruling establishment to deny any connection between the fatal police shooting of the Latino teenager and the on-going police harassment of minority youth.

In the aforementioned *La Presse* editorial, Prate goes out of his way to reassure his readers that "absolutely nothing indicates that Montreal's police agents are a pack of racist thugs." The latter phrase is an apt one.

"The relationship between young men and the police in these hot areas is very difficult," Maria Mourani, a sociologist and Bloc Québécois MNA, commented to the *Gazette* August 12. "If you are male, a member of a visible minority and drive a sports car, you can be targeted," Mourani said. "One youth told me he was stopped 10 times in one day. That is a lot and I think the young people are fed up."

This is particularly the case—and has been for years—in the heavily immigrant neighborhood of Montreal-North, nicknamed "the Bronx," where Fredy Villanueva was killed. The area has highly concentrated pockets of poverty and all the associated social problems, including gang and drug-related violence. These problems are coupled with police repression and criminalization of the population.

Jacques Hébert, a professor of social work at Montreal's UQAM university, said of the area: "A study I co-directed in 1996 to understand the social trajectory of young Haitians living in this neighborhood found that a majority of them had been 'aggressively' called over by police agents during routine checks. The term most frequently used by law-enforcement officers was the word 'nigger'."

In a similar observation, Pierreson Vaval, a youth-group leader in the Montreal-North neighborhood, told the press of youth "in revolt because they don't like the way they are being treated. They don't like how authorities interact with them."

This remark was singled out for condemnation in the aforementioned *Globe and Mail* editorial as an attempt to "dignify the stealing of meat from small butcher shops or the burning of cars as an expression of oppressed youth."

The mouthpiece of Canada's financial establishment wants no examination of the social roots of last week's riot in the north end of Montreal because of what would be exposed: mounting police brutality and racism as the response of a ruling class that has no progressive solution to the acute social ills generated by its profit-based system.

Statistics for the Montreal-North neighborhood are staggering in that regard: 40 percent of its 85,000 inhabitants live below the official poverty line, double the provincial rate; 46 percent of its tenants spend about a third or more of their income on rent, as opposed to 35 percent in the city as a whole; the unemployment rate is 12 percent, as opposed to 8 percent in the province; and among those aged 15 to 24, the unemployment rate jumps to 16 percent, as opposed to 13 percent in the province.

Marie Manseau, a teacher at a primary school attended mostly by Montreal-North pupils, described to *La Presse* the social process through which poor children are being denied a future. "It's normal that things boil over when so many kids lack goals and occupations. They must be motivated by engaging them in activities. It's impressive to see how one can revive the flame thanks to a school journal, a theater piece or a visit to the museum. Unfortunately, the budgets are never there and, with the [education] reform, artistic-oriented activities were slashed. Half of the professionals lost their jobs."



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