# Montreal: Community boycott forces suspension of inquest into police murder of immigrant youth

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One day after the beginning of a coroner's inquest into the police killing of 18 year-old Freddy Villanueva, Judge Robert Sansfaçon ordered the proceedings suspended indefinitely.

A police action in the working class and heavily immigrant neighbourhood of Montreal North, August 9, 2008, resulted in the gunning down of the unarmed Villanueva and the wounding of two other youths.

The families of the victims and many local community organizations, including several set up in the aftermath of Villanueva's death, have boycotted the inquest because they objected to the official favouritism being shown the police, are angered by an earlier decision to absolve the police involved of any wrongdoing and, more generally, are distrustful of the authorities' readiness to address any of the real issues raised by Villanueva's death, including police harassment of the local population and racial profiling.

Regarding the coroner's inquest, Freddy Villanueva's mother said: "I don't have any confidence [in it], absolutely no confidence."

In explaining his decision to suspend the coroner's inquest, Judge Sansfaçon said that the credibility and legitimacy of the inquiry he was conducting were "in jeopardy."

The previous day, the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP), the police force that had been given the responsibility for investigating the killing of Villanueva, conceded that it had never interrogated Jean-Loup Lapointe, the officer who had fired on Villanueva and the two other youths, or his partner before determining that no criminal charges should be laid. The extent of the QPP's "inquiry" into the two officers' actions was to solicit written statements from them more than a week after the events in question, thus giving the two police officers ample time to agree on their version of the events.

This revelation only serves to confirm the popular mistrust of, and opposition to, the police and legal system. The day after Villanueva was gunned down a spontaneous protest against police brutality took place in Montreal-North, one of the city's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The protest subsequently degenerated into a riot.

The suspension of the inquiry has provoked grave concern in official circles. The opposition in the Quebec National Assembly has accused the Liberal Minister of Public Safety, Jacques Dupuis, of having contributed to the undermining of the inquiry's credibility. Pauline Marois, the leader of the Parti Québécois (PQ), the right-wing *indépendantiste* party that constitutes the official opposition, declared: "If Mr. Dupuis had listened to the people of the neighbourhood, to the affected family, he wouldn't now face the risk of an aborted coroner's inquest, which I think should take place."

What troubles the opposition parties is not the lot of the people of Montreal-North—the PQ and the Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ), no less than Liberals, have contributed to the social crisis that afflicts large parts of Quebec's metropolis with their relentless pursuit of pro-big business policies, including massive cuts to public and social services.

Their concern is that the intransigence of Dupuis and the Liberal government is undermining the establishment's attempts to appease popular anger while staunchly protecting the police, and thereby further inflaming an explosive social climate. The Liberals, for their part, are bowing to pressure from the police and sections of big business who oppose anything that might result, whether through public exposure or new regulations, in restrictions on the police's vast arbitrary powers.

The coroner's inquest is the response of the Quebec establishment to the events that took place in Montreal-North on the 9th and 10th of August 2008. On the evening of August 9, Freddy Villanueva, an 18-year old Honduran, was playing with his friends in a neighbourhood park. Two police officers from the Montreal city police approached and

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began to arrest Freddy's brother, Dany, without any apparent cause. When Freddy protested against the arbitrary arrest of his brother, one of the two police officers drew his weapon and fired, killing Freddy and wounding two of his friends.

The police would subsequently claim that they were defending themselves after having been attacked by the youth. But this claim has been contradicted by many other people present in or near the park at the time. The day after, protests and later a riot erupted. For more on these events see: Canadian media covers up the social roots of the Montreal riot.

Even before the Quebec Provincial Police had completed their sham inquiry and announced that no charges would be laid against the police officer Lapointe, Quebec's Liberal government had determined it would try to staunch opposition to the whitewashing of Lapointe's action by immediately calling a coroner's inquest.

In announcing the inquest, Minister of Public Safety Dupuis said that "out of compassion" the government was offering to pay for a lawyer to assist the Villanueva family during four days of the coroner's inquest. As for the other persons wounded by the police, the Minister repeatedly rejected their requests for help in paying their legal costs. The police, meanwhile, are benefiting from the services of six lawyers paid out of public funds, as well as the support of the police establishment and the politically powerful police officers association.

Judge Sansfaçon noted this glaring inequity in explaining his decision to suspend the coroner's inquest. Dupuis has now "revisited" his decision and said the government is ready to defray some of the other victims' legal costs.

This latest maneuver has done little if anything to dent the popular outrage over the police murder of Villanueva. Many are demanding that the government order a public commission of inquiry into the events of last August 8 and 9, arguing that such an inquiry could and should have a much wider mandate so as to investigate community complaints of police brutality, racial profiling and lack of government social support.

There have been several protests against police brutality in Montreal North in the past ten months.

Will Prosper, the spokesperson for the "Republic of Montreal-North," an organization founded in response to the events of last August, recently declared, "If we want to prevent other such tragic events, we must look at the social tensions and socio-economic conditions in Montreal-North, but also at the relations between citizens and the police... If another youth dies in nebulous circumstances, it is certain that there will be more riots. And the government will be responsible."

The socio-economic context definitely played a role in the death of the young Villanueva. It was at the root of it, even. So it would be dangerous to believe that the solution resides in a reform of police intervention techniques, in vague promises of economic aid, such as those made by the municipal government of Montreal, or even in the convening of an expanded public inquiry that would consider racial profiling and socio-economic conditions.

Québec Solidaire (QS), a self-avowed "left, Quebec sovereignist" party, which advances a program of timid reforms, has taken up the demand for "a commission of public inquiry with an enlarged mandate." It is also appealing for the Villanueva case to be entrusted to the Minister of Justice, Kathleen Weil, rather than to the Minister of Public Safety, the minister directly responsible for supervising the police.

By such appeals, Québec Solidaire, as is its habit, promotes the idea that official bourgeois institutions that are more and more discredited, like the police or the National Assembly, can be reformed so as to express the interests and aspirations of the population. In adopting this position, QS attempts to mask and attenuate the class conflict between the ruling elite and the working class, rather than exposing that conflict as the objective source of difficult socio-economic conditions and police brutality.

All of the parties at all levels of government are responsible for the social conditions that ravage disadvantaged neighbourhoods like Montreal-North and, in a more general way, are responsible for the worst economic crisis to strike the capitalist system since 1929.

The fact that a defenceless, working-class immigrant youth was killed by the police and that the government's attempt to whitewash this crime has been disrupted by mounting popular anger is a reflection of profound objective changes and heralds an intensification of class conflict.

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