

Chicago teen killed in street brawl

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7 October 2009

On September 24, Derrion Albert, a 16-year-old Chicago public school student, was brutally beaten to death in a large street fight while walking home from school. The brawl, caught on video by another student, involved at least 50 teenagers, most of whom attend Christian Fenger Academy High School in Roseland.

According to most accounts, Albert was drawn into the fight as he walked to a city bus stop. Apparently, his attackers had no grudge against him. Four teenagers are currently being held without bond on first-degree murder charges.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Fenger students have repeatedly fought on the streets before and after school. Students from the Roseland neighborhood surrounding the school, known locally as the “Ville,” have clashed with another group of students from Altgeld Gardens, the largest public housing project in Chicago. The development is located five miles southeast of the school, separated from the city by a complex of railroad and industrial complexes.

The students from Altgeld Gardens have attended Fenger since the Chicago Public School (CPS) board transformed the school that used to serve their neighborhood, Carver High, into a selective-enrollment military academy.

At least five Chicago teenagers have died in similar violence since the beginning of the school year a month ago, and at least seven others have been wounded.

The graphic video of Albert’s death, broadcast widely on television and the Internet, has aroused widespread horror and shock.

Predictably, the Obama administration, Chicago politicians, and the usual assortment of black nationalist and religious figures have seized on the tragedy to promote their own reactionary agendas.

At a public funeral service held October 3, Jesse Jackson, Nation of Islam head Louis Farrakhan, and Chicago pastor E.G. Ledbetter Jr. took to the pulpit

with appeals to faith and calls for “personal responsibility” on the part of parents.

Farrakhan told the assembly that Albert’s “righteous life served as a redemptive force to make us get up and save our children,” and Ledbetter inveighed that “fathers need to go home and mothers need to be home.”

But most commentary on the killing of Derrion Albert has dwelled on its supposed “senselessness,” thus eliding the social collapse from which the violence, chaos, and brutality that pervades Chicago have arisen.

This is not accidental. The social crisis in Chicago is the result of definite policies that have been implemented by the Democratic Party machine that controls the city.

This week, Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will be in Chicago to make public statements on youth crime.

Duncan, who was “CEO” of the CPS before his federal appointment, bears responsibility for the breakdown caused by dozens of school closures and the forced displacement of thousands of students into huge consolidated schools—the precise scenario that underlay the violence between Altgeld Gardens and Roseland students that took Derrion Albert’s life.

After the CPS transformed Carver High School from a general enrollment neighborhood school into Carver Military Academy, it ordered the students from Altgeld Gardens to attend Fenger, although it appears that little attention was paid to integrating the two groups of students.

With a single city bus route serving the 190-acre Altgeld Gardens project, children have little choice but to hop city buses or walk to school. As the *Tribune* commented, “That put many Altgeld kids at Fenger behind enemy lines, traversing unfamiliar streets in unfriendly territory.”

Fenger, as the recipient of students from closing schools, soon saw its already mediocre graduation rates sink, along with other measures of student achievement. Like many other public schools during Duncan's tenure at the CPS, Fenger was then subjected to a "turnaround," in which its entire complement of teachers and staff was sacked and rehired under new contracts or else replaced.

The firings did not aim to improve education, as claimed. Their purpose was to cut the wages and benefits of teachers and educational staff. Pushed through using dubious statistics and specious arguments, the firings' net effect was to deprive the students of Fenger of teachers acquainted with them and their needs—teachers more sensitive to tensions between different groups.

Fenger remains one of the worst performing of all CPS high schools. Its five-year freshman graduation rate is an appalling 33 percent, and of those who graduate, a mere 38 percent end up attending some amount of college. Just 3 percent of students meet or exceed the standards of Illinois's Prairie State Achievement Examination.

The destruction of the public schools is just one manifestation of the far broader crisis confronting the city's youth.

The decimation of the social and economic foundations of Chicago's working class neighborhoods has had an enormously destabilizing effect on the city's young population. In the Roseland neighborhood where Albert was killed, the unemployment rate stood at 19.7 percent even before the onset of the economic crisis of the past year. In vast swathes of the southeast part of the city, unemployment is higher than 15 percent, according to the Metro Chicago Information Center.

General poverty measures express the realities even more starkly. According to CPS figures, a staggering 98.8 percent of Fenger High School students come from low-income households.

Such a state of distress results from many decades of the closure of factories once associated with titans of industry such as Armour, Pullman, Ford, and U.S. Steel.

Similarly disastrous has been the decay of public housing in the city. Altgeld Gardens, one of the first large-scale public housing projects in the country, was built in 1945 to house returning African-American

veterans of World War II and their families. Now, half of its nearly 1,200 units stand empty, leaving 3,400 residents on the isolated 190-acre project, with little access to shopping or transportation.

Built on a former landfill and located in the remnants of an industrial corridor, Altgeld Gardens is a heavily polluted area, a study by the University of Wisconsin has warned. Dozens of toxic facilities and 90 percent of the city's landfills are located nearby. There is evidence of exceptionally high rates of miscarriage, stillbirths, and birth defects among residents, along with higher incidence of asthma and skin rashes. Residents say that during Chicago's hot and humid summers, the smell emanating from the dumps is unbearable.

While Chicago's Democratic Party politicians—among them Barack Obama—have implemented and overseen this vast impoverishment, enormous fortunes have been made.

According to the latest Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans, in the Chicago area there are 18 billionaires with a combined net worth of \$35 billion.



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