

# The killing of Trayvon Martin

Patrick Martin  
26 March 2012

The wanton and unprovoked shooting of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old black youth gunned down by a neighborhood watch volunteer one month ago in Sanford, Florida, has sparked a wave of protests and demands that the killer be arrested and prosecuted.

The shooter, George Zimmerman, is clearly a disturbed individual. The son of a military veteran, he aspired to join the police force but was unable to do so and organized a neighborhood watch group as a substitute. He was carrying a gun—in violation of the group's own rules—and pursued and confronted Martin despite being told by a police 911 dispatcher not to do so.

The 911 transcripts clearly show that Zimmerman singled out Martin for attention because of his race and age. Cell phone conversations between Trayvon and his 16-year-old girlfriend in Miami show that, far from seeking a confrontation, the youth had become aware that he was being followed and was seeking to get away as fast as he could without drawing attention by running.

There were demonstrations across the country this weekend, ranging from church services in New York City where all those in attendance wore “hoodies” to show their solidarity with the murdered youth, to the members of the Miami Heat basketball team posing in similar garb. Last week, tens of thousands marched in Sanford and thousands more rallied in cities across the US.

This popular response is genuine and deeply felt and demonstrates the instinctive sympathy for the murdered youth and his family among wide layers of youth and working people of all races and ethnic backgrounds. Millions are outraged at the refusal of Sanford police and prosecutors to arrest or charge the gunman.

Side by side with this upswell of public indignation, there is another, opposed process: the politically calculated condemnation of the killing by Democratic

and Republican politicians, led by President Barack Obama.

In a carefully orchestrated statement Friday, Obama used an unrelated event, the announcement of his nominee to head the World Bank, to express sympathy for Trayvon Martin's parents and call for a full investigation by the federal Department of Justice, which had already begun several days before.

The three major candidates remaining in the race for the Republican nomination, Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich, then issued statements echoing Obama's. Santorum and Gingrich actually went further than Obama, criticizing the failure of local authorities to arrest and prosecute Zimmerman.

The hypocrisy of such comments is truly staggering. There was no Justice Department investigation and no presidential appearance in the Rose Garden when Ramarley Graham, an unarmed 18-year-old black youth, was shot to death in his own kitchen by New York City cops last month.

Such brutal acts take place on a daily basis in the United States. Last week, the mayor of Albuquerque, New Mexico publicly called for an end to the Albuquerque Police Officers Association's practice of paying a gratuity of up to \$500 to any policeman involved in a fatal shooting. Critics had compared this to placing a bounty on the heads of working-class and minority youth, who are disproportionately the victims of police violence and abuse.

Even the most flagrant cases of police violence produce only a slap on the wrist. Last week, the New York Police Department finally dismissed from its ranks one of the policemen involved in the 2006 shooting death of Sean Bell, a young black worker who was riddled with more than 50 bullets as he came out of a nightclub where he had been celebrating the eve of his wedding. None of the cops has spent even a day in jail for this street-corner execution.

The killing of Trayvon Martin is a consequence of the dominance of political reaction in the United States for more than 30 years. Law-and-order demagoguery has been employed to justify police and vigilante-style violence, culminating in the passage of legislation like Florida's notorious "Stand Your Ground" law and similar laws in as many as 20 other states. These laws sanction the use of deadly force in public places by individuals if they have a "reasonable fear" that an assailant could seriously harm them or someone else. According to one study, claims of "justifiable homicide" have tripled in Florida since the passage of the law there in 2005.

The incident itself is the byproduct of the deepening social crisis. The statewide unemployment rate in Florida is nearly 10 percent, and conditions of life in Sanford, a town on the edge of the Orlando metropolitan area, have deteriorated seriously in recent years. According to press reports, the "gated community" where both Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin's father live is not an enclave of wealth, but a middle-income area where foreclosures are on the upswing and renters are supplanting homeowners unable to meet their mortgage payments.

If the tragedy in Sanford resonates among broad layers of the working class and youth, it is largely because of the changed social and political conditions in the United States and internationally. Millions have seen their jobs and living standards slashed by the global financial crisis and slump, while budget cuts devastate public education and other vital social services. Youth have no future. They face a lifetime of low-wage and uncertain employment or joining the military and being deployed in America's endless wars of aggression and colonial occupation.

Obama and his Republican rivals for the job of serving as the commander-in-chief for the American financial aristocracy make sympathetic noises about the Trayvon Martin killing because the ruling class as a whole senses the rumblings from below and fears the consequences.

Working people and young people must draw the necessary political lessons from such events and avoid the traps of racial and identity politics and appeals to the Democratic Party promoted by aging hucksters like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. It is necessary for the working class to build a mass socialist movement in opposition to the profit system and the apparatus of

state violence and repression that defends the wealth of the super-rich.

Patrick Martin



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**