Thousands protest against killing of black teenager in Florida

Sandy English
23 March 2012

Thousands of protesters rallied in Sanford, Florida, 30 miles north of Orlando, on Thursday to protest the murder of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager, who was gunned down by a neighborhood watch captain on February 26 as he was returning from a convenience store where he bought iced tea and candy.

Thursday's rally was one of a number of protests and demonstrations that took place across the country in response to the brutal slaying. Also on Thursday, over 1,000 students walked out of Miami Carol City Senior High, the school Trayvon Martin had attended his freshman and sophomore years.

The youth streamed down NW 27th Avenue, a main thoroughfare, tying up traffic and chanting "Justice for Trayvon." A protest also took place at a second Miami-area school, Miami Northwestern, several miles south.

The night before, over 1,000 people marched through Manhattan in New York City after a rally addressed by Trayvon's parents. Similar protests took place in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood and in other cities.

The spontaneous outpouring in response to the execution-style murder of the 17-year-old has triggered concern within the American political establishment, which has responded, on the one hand, with half-measures by Florida authorities meant to dissipate the protests, and, on the other, with attempts by Democratic politicians and media figures like Al Sharpton to channel them into the safe confines of identity politics.

The protests have centered on the parents' demand for the arrest of the youth's killer, George Zimmerman. The neighborhood watch captain followed Trayvon, 17, in his SUV and identified him in a local 911 emergency call as "suspicious" on the grounds that he was wearing a hood over his sweatshirt. The 911 operator instructed Zimmerman to stop the pursuit, but he persisted. He apparently provoked an altercation with the young man, much of which was captured on a phone call between Trayvon and his girlfriend in the moments before he was shot dead.

The Sanford police declined to arrest Zimmerman on the basis of the notorious "stand your ground" law, enacted in 2005 and signed by then-governor Jeb Bush. The legislation, strongly backed by the National Rifle Association, gives the benefit of the doubt to legally armed citizens who claim that they reasonably believed that deadly force was necessary.

Martin's parents, Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton, met Thursday with officials of the federal Justice Department, which has announced the opening of a civil rights investigation into the death, but reportedly implored the parents to have patience.

Florida's right-wing Republican Governor Rick Scott Thursday announced the appointment of a special prosecutor in the case. He issued a statement saying he was doing so "with the intent of toning down the rhetoric and preserving the integrity of this investigation."

Also on Thursday the Sanford, Florida police chief, Bill Lee, announced that he was "temporarily" stepping down from his post. The action, coming a day after the city commissioners of Sanford voted by a 3-2 margin to express no confidence in Lee, did nothing to appease the family of Trayvon Martin or the thousands who are protesting and demanding Zimmerman's arrest.

The police refusal to arrest Zimmerman is only the latest of a number of incidents in the Orlando suburb that have angered black residents and others. Lee's immediate predecessor was forced out of office after a police lieutenant's son, who attacked a homeless man in December 2010, was not arrested. Some years earlier, two white security guards, one of whom was the son of a former Sanford cop, killed a black youth and successfully claimed self-defense, although the victim was shot in the back.

Over 1,000 people rallied together with Trayvon's parents in Union Square in New York City on March 21.

Many youth were attracted to the New York City march by social media such as Twitter and a Facebook page called "A Million Hoodies March for Trayvon Martin NYC."

Tracy Martin, Travyon's father, addressed the crowd: "We're not going to stop until we get justice for Trayvon. George Zimmerman took Trayvon's life for nothing," he said. "My son did not deserve to die."

Sybrina Fulton told the crowd, "My heart is in pain, but to see the support of all of you really makes a difference." She

© World Socialist Web Site

appealed for multiracial unity in fighting back. “Our son is your son,” she said. “This is not about a black and white thing. This is about a right and wrong thing.”

Black Democratic Party elected officials who spoke at the rally, however, made every effort to channel the anger of the crowd in a purely racial direction that emphasized the concerns of the upper middle class and not a working class struggle against inequality. City Councilman Jumaane Williams said, “I know I’m black. I reek of Brooklyn. But I’m not a criminal. I’m a city councilman. Some of us are doctors.”

Not one speaker from the podium raised the issues of social inequality in Florida or New York, and the effort to encourage vigilantism and racism in order to divide the working class in the face of the desperate social and economic crisis.

The New York Police Department routinely stops and searches hundreds of thousands of youth, predominantly black and Hispanic, every year, blatantly violating their constitutional rights. The numbers of those stop-and-frisked have risen steadily every year since billionaire Michael Bloomberg became the city’s mayor in 2002. The NYPD is well aware of the anger among workers and youth at the constant and growing abuse, and this was evinced by the heavy police presence at the demonstration.

This anger, both at the killing of Trayvon Martin and at the worsening conditions of life being imposed upon masses of working people in New York and across the country, was expressed by rally participants who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Tianna Gray, a student at Vanguard High School in Manhattan, told the WSWS: “They shot him on the way to the store because he had a hoody on and he was black. Our government is failing the youth. There are all these high schools getting closed down. My school has four schools in a four-story building. It’s 30 to 40 kids to a class.

“The kids who go to the schools being broken up are middle class, lower class, and low class, on welfare and public assistance. They don’t care about us. They are working so hard to push us apart, to keep from uniting.”

Janeen Washington, a resident of Brooklyn who attended the rally, told the WSWS: “I think the circumstances around this event are appalling. This was a young man being killed senselessly.

“There are so many killings like this that aren’t dealt with. It isn’t on television; they don’t even mention them. I am appalled by what happened, but I’m not surprised. I think that there is so much evidence around this one that it caused a rally.”

When asked what caused the killing, she replied, “Racism is a cancer. This comes from a fear of the unknown.” She added, “Socio-economic status is brushed under the rug. This is the story of a certain man from a specific class and ethnicity being killed, but can’t be pushed under the rug.”

Lili Keyes, who teaches at a high school in the Bronx, told the WSWS: “I am not surprised at what has happened to Trayvon Martin. Even though I feel nothing is being done, I feel I have to come here. There is strength in numbers, and I just cannot let this happen without a reaction.

“You don’t want to send your kids to the store no matter where you live. I feel like people are trying to get away from the ghetto for a better life. But wherever you go, you are still at risk.

“In education, the system is not working and is slanted against low income students. I would have to say that in education, the people who are running the system today should not be running it. Education is being taken out of the hands of the teachers and the communities. I work in a low income community in the Bronx, and education is not being set up for my students. Unfortunately, if I want to keep my job, I have to teach to their guidelines.

“The youth are frustrated because they have no place to go today. They have cut the music programs and the art programs, and then the labeling starts to say a black male with a hoody suggests your neighborhood is in danger. Everyone is being affected, but the people in power are not concerned. They make an appearance for the cameras, but they are not concerned.”

Amanda Kennedy, 26, a graduate student in sociology at Stony Brook, said, “I am from Florida. They have this law that states that if one thinks his life is in danger then he can take action. Zimmerman is using this law now to justify his killing of a black youth. This law is horrible. It is a license to kill and justifies racist violence.

“I do not think that the two parties represent the diversity of views in the US. I think that they represent the 1 percent—the rich capitalists. I know that both parties do not speak for me.

“A lot of my friends have tens of thousands of dollars in student debt, averaging about 50 to 60 thousand dollars. And there are just a few jobs to compete for. Many of us will be stuck with all this debt.

“I am against economic inequality. I think socialism has been demonized. People who fight for social justice are put through a smear campaign.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site