

The killing of Trayvon Martin and the social crisis in the US

Statement by Jerry White, SEP candidate for president

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The killing of Trayvon Martin on February 26 was a horrific crime that has provoked justified anger and protests throughout the country and internationally. A 17-year-old African American youth was shot in cold blood while walking through a neighborhood in Sanford, Florida, unarmed. More than a month later, his killer, George Zimmerman, has not been arrested or charged with any crime.

The more that comes out about the killing, the more outrageous this injustice becomes. Recordings from 911 calls (which police resisted releasing) make clear that Zimmerman, who was on so-called neighborhood watch at the time, pursued Martin despite explicit instructions from the 911 operator not to.

Claims that Zimmerman killed Martin in self-defense and after suffering a broken nose—made by Zimmerman’s father, a former judge in Orange County, Florida and cited by police to justify their non-action—are belied by recently released video evidence showing him without apparent injuries only 40 minutes after pulling the trigger. Indeed, the lead homicide investigator did not accept the self-defense rationale and recommended charges be brought, but the state attorney’s office refused.

As the SEP candidate for president, I demand Trayvon Martin’s killer be arrested and charged.

The lessons of this incident, however, go far beyond what happened on February 26 and beyond Zimmerman, who by all evidence appears to be a deeply disturbed and unstable individual.

The widespread popular outrage over this one event is a reflection of a much broader sentiment, a feeling that there is something terribly wrong with American society and the American political system. Calling the

killing of his son an “eye-opener for the world,” Tracy Martin declared, “There is injustice, and the public is not going to stand for injustice any more.”

Who are the real political and moral authors of this injustice?

Such acts of brutal violence, generally carried out by the police and the state, are a daily occurrence in the United States. According to one report, there were 127 fatalities in 2010 due to credible allegations of excessive force by police—that is, more than one every three days. America, the “land of the free,” is in fact a country where life is cheap, where young men can be killed routinely, with absolutely no accountability.

Indeed, if it were not for the courageous and principled struggle of Martin’s parents to bring this case to light, it would likely have been buried and ignored like so many others.

Over the past three decades, the response of the corporate and financial elite to a deepening social crisis for millions of people has been to expand police powers and promote vigilante-style violence. Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law, cited by prosecutors as a reason for not bringing charges against Zimmerman, is one of more than 20 similar laws throughout the country that sanction the use of deadly force. These laws encourage the notion that one can protect oneself as an individual, when the real problems facing millions of people—unemployment, foreclosures, poverty—are social and political.

Every social problem in America is treated as a criminal problem. With two and a half million people in prison or jail, the United States imprisons a far higher percentage of its population than any other country in the world.

More generally, state organized violence has become a defining feature of American politics, from the president on down. Indeed, early in March Obama's attorney general, Eric Holder, gave a speech justifying the extra-legal assassination of American citizens—with the president acting as judge, jury and executioner.

The United States routinely orders CIA drone strikes all over the world, taking out individuals declared to be “terrorists.” War is unending, with one invasion following the next. Following his predecessor, Obama has promoted the death penalty and the increased powers of the police to spy on the American people and crack down on political dissent.

The professed sympathy of Obama and other politicians for the killing of Martin is the worst hypocrisy. The American ruling class and its political representatives, both Democrats and Republicans, have far more blood on their hands than Zimmerman.

Moreover, every measure taken by the Obama administration—the slashing of funding for public education and other social programs, the promotion of wage cuts and the indifference to mass unemployment and home foreclosures—has only worsened conditions for every section of the working class. This includes millions of African American youth who have been consigned by the economic and political system to a life of poverty and unemployment, without the hope of a future.

The backward, reactionary and psychologically disturbed actions of people like Zimmerman are one product of this filthy environment.

The Democratic Party politicians and their supporters have centered their comments on the killing of Trayvon Martin on race. In so far as racism played a role, it cannot be separated from the economic and political climate, and the long-standing effort by the ruling class to divide the working class and block a unified struggle against the capitalist system, which oppresses workers of all races and nationalities.

Political operatives like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who have turned the promotion of racial politics into an industry, have quickly intervened in the protests against Martin's killing. Along with the coterie of middle class organizations, their role is to obscure the more fundamental social, economic and political issues.

They attempt to argue that the enormous social and

economic problems confronting African American youth can be solved by bringing in more black politicians and businessmen, culminating in the election of Obama. In fact, thirty years of this type of politics have only produced ever-worsening conditions for the vast majority of African Americans, along with the working class as a whole.

At the same time, it has elevated a layer of African Americans, including Jackson and Sharpton into the halls of corporate and political power, where they have defended the capitalist system just as ruthlessly as their white counterparts.

The killing of Trayvon Martin is not fundamentally about race, a fact that is understood by many involved in the demonstrations. There is a sense that the conditions of oppression, inequality and injustice affect workers of all races and nationalities.

The mass protests against the killing of Martin are taking place against the backdrop of a deepening economic and social crisis—mass unemployment, record poverty, the decimation of social programs across the country. The financial aristocracy has responded to the economic crisis that erupted in 2008 by shoveling money into the banks and organizing a coordinated assault on the working class.

In response to these conditions, a new type of politics is needed. This is why the Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the elections. What is needed is a unified movement of the entire working class—black, white and immigrant—that insists that all workers be guaranteed the social right to a job, health care, housing and a future. This means the fight for socialism.



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