

Saginaw, Michigan residents speak on police killing

An SEP campaign team
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Residents of Saginaw, Michigan spoke to Socialist Equality Party campaigners Saturday at the site of a July 1 police killing. Six officers shot homeless man Milton Hall 46 times as he sat outside the Riverview Plaza strip mall, where he frequently panhandled.

SEP supporters distributed election material to residents, including a statement by presidential candidate Jerry White on recent police killings in Anaheim, California. (See, “Police violence in Anaheim: the class issues”)

Hall was a 49-year-old black man who suffered from mental illness and disability. Police claimed he posed a mortal threat to them by allegedly brandishing a folding knife and making “aggressive movements” toward an officer. Hall had been accused of stealing a cup of coffee.

The killing was the fourth by police in Saginaw this year. On March 23, two state troopers shot and killed 24-year-old Keontae Amerson during a traffic stop. On April 10, Saginaw police shot and killed 18-year-old Andre Jones, whom they accused of attempting to break into a home. The same afternoon, police fatally tasered 38-year-old Bobby Louis Merrill, who they said was “disrupting traffic.”

In the case of Hall, Saginaw’s Democratic Party Mayor Greg Branch said officers had only one consideration: “End the threat. I don’t think there’s a police officer in the country who wouldn’t prefer to have it end with the person dropping the weapon and surrendering,” Branch told *MLive*. “But the second that person chooses to attack, or even make a serious threat to, the police are trained to instinctively use the force necessary to stop the threat completely.” The six officers were placed on paid administrative leave during the course of a state police investigation.

The shooting provoked a huge public outcry. Residents have packed city council meetings demanding justice for Hall’s family and punishment for the police officers involved. The public anger has been seized on by Democratic Party politicians, church leaders, and the NAACP in an attempt to affect racial “reforms” in the hiring policy of the police department. Presently, 35 percent of the Saginaw police force is black or Hispanic.

At its peak in 1960, Saginaw’s population was approximately

98,000. By 2010 this had fallen to 51,000, a decline of 48 percent. At one point there were 13 total auto plants in the city, employing more than 20,000 workers. Currently, two plants—GM’s Saginaw Metal Castings Operation and Nexteer—remain in operation, and employ a small fraction of their original number of workers.

Economic collapse in the city has been accompanied by rising police aggression and the gutting of social and physical infrastructure. The Democratic Party-led city and county governments have spearheaded an effort to “rightsize” the areas of Saginaw most deeply affected by the foreclosure crisis and loss of industry. This “greening” of the city consists of aggressive acquisition and demolition of buildings, the abandonment of entire neighborhoods, including streets, sidewalks and utility lines. SEP campaigners sought to draw out this social and political context of the police violence in discussions with residents.

Kelly Abner, 61, is a lifelong resident of Saginaw. She expressed outrage at the police killing and the lack of resources available to help those like Milton Hall. “I knew Milton from when I worked as a security guard. There are a lot of mentally ill homeless people,” she said. “They don’t have facilities to care for them. So they are turned out on the streets, and they have to fend for themselves. If you are homeless then you are living between a rock and a crack, and what do you do? You fall through.

“The police should not have killed Milton,” Kelly said. “He was scared. We can’t accept this. If we do, it will go on and on. It’s a life gone. There will be others if we don’t stop it. We have to stop it. There have to be more mediators.”

Kelly expressed religious convictions, and blamed youth for much of the social breakdown. “They don’t even try to get involved or work. There are jobs out there, and education is easy for them to get. But they don’t care.” To solve the problem of social violence, she said, “It has to be everybody altogether, not just the churches.”

SEP supporters explained that public demonstrations called by church leaders and Democratic Party-oriented activists were an attempt to smother public anger and redirect it back into the safe channels of the political establishment, and that it divides working class residents along racial and generational lines. What was necessary was an independent mobilization of all working-class residents, who are politically and socially disenfranchised.

Kelly conceded that young people didn't have as many opportunities as in previous generations, and said that older workers were facing similar difficulties. "I know another homeless man like Milton, who used to be a college professor," she said. "But he became mentally ill. He lives under a bridge now. There are so many people who have nothing. It is so hard to get back on your feet if you fall down. It's hard to even get a GED [high school equivalency diploma], or get on a computer. How do you get work-ready if you're older?"

She also agreed with campaigners who explained the SEP's call for the defense of social rights. "We have to find out what everyone needs," she said. "We need to have something to get involved, as a community, meetings to talk about the issues. It is like there is a little war in your own city—in Saginaw, Grand Rapids, Detroit, in cities in Ohio, everywhere."

Holding up the SEP's election statement, Kelly added, "We can't go on having Democrats and Republicans. They're money people. There's got to be someone else put in there. I'm going to take this statement to my friends and my church and tell them to support you."

Campaigners spoke to Troy Jackson, 51, as he walked his bicycle, loaded with bags, past the shops. "They shot Milton because he was black," he declared. "It was wrong and it was cowardly. God will take care of them. Police are supposed to protect people, not shoot people to get their jollies. He wasn't a threat. They probably could have just pushed him down."

SEP campaigners stressed that the question was not primarily of race, and that the working class could not afford the religious beliefs peddled by the church officials that a higher power would alleviate social misery. Recalling another recent police homicide, Troy contradicted himself. "They tased a white teenage boy too. They're equal opportunity killers." Insisting on a religious answer to the violence, Troy nevertheless warmly wished campaigners success.

Shaheen, 27, grew up in Saginaw and works as a manager at Jimmy John's sandwich shop. He said job opportunities for young people were limited to low-wage sectors. "Things have gotten a lot worse since auto plants have shut down," he said.

"I haven't followed the elections," he said. "Everything is going downhill. Even if they were good candidates, one person can't change things."

Shaheen expressed conflicted feelings about the killing of Hall. "It's really rough around this area," he said. "I heard he lunged at a cop. Maybe they should have tased him instead of shooting him. I'd like to be a cop, but I'm a coward. I have a friend who became a cop, and when I asked him what he would do to stay safe, he just said, 'Get another gun.' I am not sure that solves the problems." Campaigners sought to explain the class role of the police, under conditions of growing social inequality. Shaheen said he had not heard about the developments in Anaheim but said he would read Jerry White's statement on the class issues involved.

Geraldine is a retired teacher. She was angry at the argument made by the Saginaw police department that officers had no choice but to kill Mr. Hall. "They had dogs," she explained. "Why did

they need to shoot him?" She responded to the police claim that tasers were insufficient to the supposed threat Hall posed. "They tased my daughter and she dropped like a rock."

Geraldine told campaigners she grew up in Saginaw in a family of teachers, moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, and then returned to her hometown. The economic situation in Las Vegas is "worse than people realize," she said, and Saginaw has seen a similar social and economic collapse. The city's schools have been subjected to repeated budget cuts. "Teaching used to be a profession," Geraldine commented. "Now, teachers don't know if they'll have a job."

John Moore, 47, works at a steel shop in Saginaw. "I've lived here for eight years. Life here is getting worse every day," he said. "The violence at night has made me feel like I can't go out. What the police did to that man was wrong. They ended a life. The homeless sit out asking for money. They aren't taking it other ways, they are asking for help. They have to eat too."

"I agree that we need an independent party to fight for us," John said. He took the SEP's election statement, said he would show it to his girlfriend, and wished campaigners the best of luck.

"I was very outraged about this killing," 56-year-old Polly Conway said. "Forty-six bullets! And this happens in a parking lot full of people. Children saw this happen. It was not called for."

"The police are out of control. In 2010 they tased my 21-year-old son while he was sitting on the living room floor of my home, with relatives sitting right there."

"Just last week I got pulled over at 12:30 at night for doing nothing at all. I worked for 32 years at GM on second shift and was always driving at night. Since when is that suspicious activity? I know another lady who said she also got pulled over for nothing."

Polly was angered by the police crackdown on minority youth. "Some of the kids are bad, sure. So what? I told my sons I don't even want them out at night. They'll pull you over and do god knows what. The racism is rampant in the police. It's much worse now. I don't even understand it. When I worked in the shop, you work with everyone, black, white, Mexican, gay, male, female—what does any of that matter?" An SEP supporter said that class was the primary category. "That's right," Polly said. "The cops go after you because you're poor."

"I watch the news every night to find out what's going on with the Hall case, if they're going to do anything about it. But they don't. And they won't."

For more information on the SEP campaign and to get involved, visit socialequality.com.



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