

The Chicago Facebook torture video: A symptom of social decay in capitalist America

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Last week in Chicago, four young people posted a live video on Facebook showing them beating and abusing a schizophrenic 18-year-old. The attackers were African-American and the victim was white.

The 28-minute video, a disturbing exhibition of cruelty, provoked a public outcry, with many asking: How could this happen, and why?

The nearly universal response of the media to the video, which includes racial taunts of the victim, was to focus exclusively on the issue of race. While racism may very well have played a role in the incident, the facts by no means support the assumption that it was the primary motivation in the attack.

To investigate the more fundamental causes is not to excuse this indefensible act but to try to understand it. The backwardness and violence expressed in the actions of the perpetrators cannot be seriously considered apart from the conditions of grinding poverty that dominate the Chicago neighborhood in which they live and the impact of reactionary political and ideological trends such as racial politics that are so relentlessly promoted by the Democratic Party political establishment and the media.

The four attackers, Jordan Hill, 18, Tesfaye Cooper, 18, and sisters Brittany Covington, 18, and Tanishia Covington, 24, face multiple charges, including kidnapping and battery. All four have been denied bond and are currently in prison.

Hill and the victim attended an alternative high school together in Aurora, Illinois. The victim, with his mother's permission, met Hill at a McDonald's in a north Chicago suburb and slept over at Hill's grandmother's home for two nights. The victim's mother subsequently lost contact with the victim on January 2. On the same day, she reached out to Hill on Facebook and asked him to return her son home. At this point, Hill became angry, beat the victim, and drove him to his sister's apartment in the East Garfield Park neighborhood on Chicago's west side, meeting the rest of the attackers.

The video, broadcast live on Facebook on January 3, shows the attackers, amongst other things, harassing,

beating, and strangling the victim with a cord, and forcing him to say "fuck Trump." The two male attackers are also heard shouting "fuck Trump" and "fuck white people" multiple times.

Right-wing elements have attempted to exploit the video to legitimize their political agenda. TV personality Glenn Beck tweeted last week, "Stand up with me and demand justice in Chicago for the beating of a disabled Trump supporter by BLM [Black Lives Matter]."

There is no evidence that the white victim was a Trump supporter or that the attackers were linked to Black Lives Matter.

At the same time, pseudo-left advocates of racial and identity politics have rushed to deny any connection between the racist conceptions Black Lives Matter and they themselves promote and the brutal incident in Chicago. On January 9, Keith Rosenthal wrote an article on socialistworker.org, the web site of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), reiterating his organization's promotion of BLM as a progressive, anti-racist representative of black people in America.

Rosenthal wrote: "The fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has been at the forefront of challenging these abuses makes it all the more perversely ironic that right-wingers and racists are trying to claim that the abuse of a disabled man is the logical outgrowth of the movement."

The claim that Black Lives Matter is engaged in a genuine or progressive struggle against racism is false. It is not an organization of the African-American masses, but rather of a privileged layer of upper-middle class blacks—academics, entrepreneurs, government officials—that is wholly devoted to acquiring more money, power and status and a bigger share of the income and wealth of the top 10 percent in America.

Closely integrated into the Democratic Party and allied to the Obama administration, it has, in fact, promoted a deeply reactionary racist narrative, branding the "white working class" as racist and blaming it for the election of Trump. In November, the Black Lives Matter Global Network wrote,

“What is true today—and has been true since the seizure of this land—is that when black people and women build power, white people become resentful. Last week, that resentment manifested itself in the election of a white supremacist to the highest office in American government.”

In rushing to the defense of BLM’s politics, the ISO is seeking to whitewash its own role in working to divide the working class along racial lines and conceal the class issues that underlie the growth of poverty, social inequality, police violence and militarism, as well as the rise of right-wing and racist political forces.

Entirely absent from Rosenthal’s comment on the Chicago video is any examination of the actual social and economic context of the incident in question. Also unmentioned is the political responsibility for the pervasive conditions of grinding poverty and social desperation in working class and minority areas of Chicago, which belongs primarily to the Democratic Party that has run the city for decades.

This is not an accident or oversight. The ISO is itself integrated into the Democratic Party and its agencies, such as the trade union bureaucracy, and speaks for privileged layers of the middle class that have moved ever further to the right.

From former mayor Harold Washington, ex-Black Panther and current US Congressman Bobby Rush, multi-millionaire Jesse Jackson, White House advisor Valerie Jarrett to Obama himself, the city’s Democratic Party machine has been a conduit for affluent African Americans to attain economic and political power. These layers enriched themselves as Chicago Democrats oversaw the deindustrialization that destroyed the jobs and communities of black, white and immigrant workers and the party replaced its reformist “war on poverty” with a war against the poor.

The video took place in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Chicago. According to city-data.com, 51 percent of East Garfield Park residents live below the poverty level. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, in the past 365 days there have been 591 thefts, 109 burglaries, 230 motor vehicle thefts and 7 acts of arson in the neighborhood.

A study by the city of Chicago determined that between 2007 and 2009, the infant mortality rate in the East Garfield Park neighborhood was among the highest in the Chicago, averaging at least 13 infant deaths per thousand babies born, double the national average.

Overall, roughly 33 percent of Chicago’s black residents live in poverty, approximately double of the white population. Last year, Chicago’s murder rate reached 746 last year, the highest in two decades.

These social conditions are the direct result of the policies carried out by the Democratic Party and accelerated under

current Democratic Party mayor and Obama’s former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel. This includes the largest ever mass closings of public schools in the United States, primarily affecting poor and minority neighborhoods. Last year, the Emanuel administration attacked the salaries and pensions of Chicago public school teachers, instituting a seven percent pay cut to cover the cost of teachers’ pensions.

Along with the austerity measures, the Democrats have systematically built up and militarized the police to defend the wealth and property of the corporate and financial elite. They have also covered up police killings, such as the murder of Laquan McDonald in 2014, and the torture of city residents by the Chicago Police Department.

Less than a half a mile away from the filming of the Facebook video is the Homan Square “black site” operated by the Chicago Police Department (CPD). In 2015, the *Guardian* reported that over 7,000 individuals “disappeared” there, meaning that no public records of the thousands detained there exists. Detainees have stated they were tortured, sexually assaulted and provided with no access to legal representation. Mayor Emanuel has consistently defended the site, stating the police there “follow all the rules.”

This is the social and political climate that produced the despicable scenes captured on Facebook video last week. Millions are deprived of the most elementary necessities of life—jobs, decent homes, education, food—while the political establishment offers them nothing but police killings and torture, the relentless promotion of racial politics and a culture that glorifies militarism, wealth and power. It is no surprise that the brutalization of society inevitably produces such brutal and anti-social acts.



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