

The killing of Ahmaud Arbery

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The release last week of dashcam footage showing the killing of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia on February 23 has sparked outrage over the murder and the attempted coverup by local authorities.

Months after the killing, the two individuals involved—Gregory McMichael, 64, and his son, Travis McMichael, 34—were finally arrested on Thursday. Gregory McMichael is a former police officer and public investigator.

The video shows that the unarmed Arbery, who had been out for a run through the Satilla Shores neighborhood just outside Brunswick, was killed in a confrontation with Travis McMichael, who was armed with a shotgun. The elder McMichael looked on from the bed of his pickup truck, armed with a pistol. Arbery bled to death in the street after being shot twice by Travis McMichael.

For weeks, there were no charges and no arrests. The killers gave statements to the police and were allowed to return home. Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper, related that she had been told by investigators that her son had been involved in a burglary and was shot by the homeowner—a blatant lie.

The killing of Arbery recalls the 2012 shooting of black Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. As was the case with Martin's killer, George Zimmerman, the McMichaels have close ties to local government and police agencies. Gregory McMichael was a Glynn County police officer in the 1980s and had just retired after 20 years as an investigator for the Brunswick Judicial Circuit District Attorney.

This led Brunswick District Attorney Jackie Johnson to recuse herself from the case. She handed the case over to Ware County District Attorney Gregory Barnhill, who advised police that there was "insufficient probable cause" to arrest the McMichaels.

Until the publication of the video, the Glynn County

Police Department and prosecutors sought to whitewash the killing as justified under Georgia's reactionary "stand-your-ground" law. They concluded that the McMichaels acted in "self-defense" while attempting to carry out a citizen's arrest.

Following the release of the video, Democratic politicians have intervened with statements focused entirely on the racial component of the murder. Arbery was black, and the McMichaels are white. On Thursday, former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democrats' presumptive presidential candidate, called the killing of Arbery part of a "rising pandemic of hate." Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders declared last week that Arbery would be alive "if he were white."

Family members and individuals organizing protests, however, have rejected efforts to pigeonhole the killing and coverup as primarily a racial issue.

The *New York Times*, in an article published Monday ("In Ahmaud Arbery's Hometown, Pain, Anger and Pride in a Shared Racial History") notes: "Most people recognize that race could have factored into the confrontation and shooting of Mr. Arbery or in the way his case was handled by the authorities. Activists also note that the Glynn County Police Department had a history of recurring allegations of police officials shielding officers accused of wrongdoing."

"It's not a black-or-white situation," Mr. Arbery's aunt, Thea Brooks, told the *Times*. "It's an everybody situation."

Significantly, the region around Brunswick has a history of opposition to segregation and racist violence. Both whites and blacks have participated in the demonstrations demanding that the killers be arrested. "Nobody would expect something like this to happen in this community," Robert Griffin, an 82-year-old resident of Brunswick told the *Times*. "It shocked everybody, including the majority of whites."

Griffin and others point to the long and sordid record

of the local police in the southern Georgia region around Brunswick of covering up misconduct and violence by police officers.

This is the reality of life in the United States. Every year, more than 1,000 people are killed by police, who are protected by the state and the courts. According to killedbypolice.net, so far this year more than 350 people have been killed by police (not including Arbery, as McMichaels was retired). While a disproportionate number of those killed are black, the largest share is white.

Under conditions of mounting social unrest and class conflict, the police are a critical component of the apparatus of state repression to be directed against the entire working class.

Racism exists, and it plays a role in incidents like the killing of Arbery. The most reactionary and backward sections of the population, including in and around the police forces, are encouraged by the present occupant of the White House.

The Trump administration has elevated far-right and fascistic individuals into the highest levels of the state and has systematically promoted racism against immigrants. As part of the drive to force a return to work amidst the expanding coronavirus pandemic, the administration has hailed far-right militia members and other fascistic organizations that have held demonstrations in state capitals to demand an end to social distancing measures.

This is an international phenomenon. In the effort to divert social tensions and create the conditions for authoritarian forms of rule, the ruling elites are resurrecting all the political filth of the 20th century. In Germany and throughout Europe, anti-Semitic violence is on the rise, as the far-right and fascistic parties have been legitimized and elevated into state power.

To the extent that racism plays a role, however, it is entirely subordinated to the fundamental class divide. Racism and national chauvinism, along with the racist politics of the Democratic Party, are used as instruments of class rule, to divert social tensions and block the development of a united movement of the entire working class.

The vast majority of workers, black and white, are outraged by the murder of Arbery and its cover-up. They correctly see it as emblematic of a society in which the lives of workers are treated as dispensable, in

which individuals connected to the state can kill and will be protected.

It is impossible to understand the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, and the cover-up that followed it, outside of this broader social and political reality. It is, fundamentally, a product of capitalism.



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