Thousands protest over suspicious hanging deaths of two black men in southern California

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Two thousand protesters marched and rallied in Palmdale, California on Saturday demanding an investigation into the death of Robert Fuller, a 24-year-old black worker found hanging from a tree near City Hall four days earlier.

Fuller's death follows a similar incident involving the hanging death of an African American man on May 31 in the city of Victorville. The body of 38-year-old Malcom Harsch was found hanging from a tree outside a public library in that city, which is just 50 miles east of Palmdale.

Fuller's death was quickly categorized as a suicide by the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office. Pending investigation, Harsch's death has also been ruled a suicide.

Family and friends of Fuller believe that he was lynched and are demanding an independent investigation into what happened, including an autopsy. On Saturday, the day of the protest, Palmdale city officials relented their initial positions and joined the call for a full investigation, reversing a statement issued by City Manager J.J. Murphy the day after the discovery of the body. That statement had been seconded by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Palmdale is located in Los Angeles County, about 60 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. Together with Victorville, situated in San Bernardino County, the Palmdale area is an important center for the aerospace industry and logistics. Scores of parts assembly companies and transportation firms employ thousands of multiethnic workers currently being exposed to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially after the recent implementation of return-to-work policies.

At the Saturday protest, demonstrators rallied at the tree where Fuller's body was found, laying bouquets, lighting candles and dedicating the square to his memory. Fuller's friends and family insist that Robert was not suicidal. "My brother was a survivor," his sister Diamond Alexander told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The newspaper also quoted other friends and family members, according to whom Fuller was a "peacemaker" who loved music and video games. A few days before his death, Fuller had attended a Black Lives Matter protest sparked by the May 25 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Tommie Anderson, one of Fuller's close friends, indicated that the circumstances of the event were suspicious. His body was found by a passerby on Wednesday at 3:30 a.m., a time when many young people never go out, hanging from a tree that was too thin, considering his body size and height.

The family said in a statement to the media, "Everyone who knew our brother was shocked to hear that he allegedly hung himself and don't believe it to be true, as well as the people who were there when his body was discovered. He didn't seem to be depressed to anyone who truly knew him. … The explanation of suicide does not seem plausible."

In the case of Harsch, the Victorville Fire Department discovered his body near the public library after being notified by a passerby. As with Fuller, Harsch's family members expressed their doubts that he had committed suicide. "The explanation of suicide does not seem plausible," the family wrote in a letter Saturday.

"There are many ways to die, but considering the current racial tension, a black man hanging himself from a tree definitely doesn't sit well with us right

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now," the family wrote. "We want justice, not comfortable excuses." The Harsch family's statement also raised questions as to why it took so long, 12 days, to perform an autopsy.

On the same day that Harsch was found, a rally had taken place in Victorville denouncing Floyd's death at the hands of the Minneapolis police and the wave of police killings across the US.

In Palmdale, following the initial rally, the demonstrators marched to the Palmdale sheriff's headquarters. Other supporters joined the march as it got underway shutting down traffic along the Sierra Highway. The marchers rallied again at the entrance of the sheriff's office.

The day before the protest, concerned Palmdale residents had presented the City Council a petition with more than 1,500 signatures, demanding a full independent investigation. An online petition currently has more than 230,000 signatures from all over the US and internationally demanding a full investigation into Fuller's death. A similar petition for Harsch had collected over 20,000 signatures as of Sunday night.

Meanwhile, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, while not yet changing its initial finding on Harsch's death and insisting that there were no signs of "foul play," indicated that the investigation is continuing.

The suspicions of the families and supporters are well-founded. Harsch allegedly hanged himself with a USB cord, while Fuller was found on a tree that could hardly support his weight. The hanging deaths of two black men in public places has historic resonance with the practice of racist lynching in the US which prevailed from the end of the 19th century through the first few decades of the 20th.

The existence of groups of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department deputies with ties to white supremacists has been widely reported in the local media, further raising questions in Palmdale.

Last year groups linked to the Ku Klux Klan were allowed to openly distribute recruitment fliers in Victorville and other San Bernardino County cities, raising suspicions about the refusal of both departments to initially carry out full investigations into the deaths of Fuller and Harsch.

The *Los Angeles Times* noted decades of housing discrimination against black residents in which San Bernardino Sheriff's deputies played a part. In 2011 the Justice Department launched an investigation into allegations that black residents in subsidized housing were being harassed and discriminated against by county housing agency officials, aided by sheriff's deputies.

The quick response of Palmdale residents to the discovery of Fuller's body is part of the growth of mass protests by workers and youth across the US and internationally against racism and police violence sparked by the murder of George Floyd.

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