Caleb Reed, a youth activist in Chicago, falls victim to gun violence

Brian Green
10 August 2020

On July 31, Caleb Reed, a 17-year-old Chicago high school student, was tragically killed by an unknown assailant. According to the police report, Reed suffered a gunshot wound to the head. He was found on the sidewalk unresponsive and was then transported to Amita Health St. Francis Hospital Evanston. He was pronounced dead the next morning.

Reed was an organizer with Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a youth group in Chicago, Illinois that advocates for more resources to be allocated to solving the social crisis facing young people. Most recently Reed centered his activism on opposing Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot's austerity budget, which is starving schools, educators, and youth of resources while flooding the Chicago Police Department (CPD) with hundreds of millions of dollars.

In June, Reed participated in the large demonstrations against police violence that were sparked by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Along with other organizers, Reed called for the removal of CPD resource officers from schools, and for support of the "Police Free Schools Ordinance" that would have prevented the Chicago Public School (CPS) from signing a $33 million contract with the CPD. Reed and other Chicago youth wanted to see less money dumped into creating a militarized police force and more resources for schools and community programs that would address inequality.

At a rally outside city hall, Reed spoke about his personal experience being brutalized by the hands of a CPD school resource officer while attending Mather High School. He was arrested at a basketball game during his second year in high school for not having his student ID in his possession.

"While I was sitting in that cell I felt angry and confused, but I remained calm because I knew the situation could have escalated real quick." Reed added, "The situation was wrong because I did nothing wrong. I would have wanted the officer to ask me to leave, but that didn't happen that day."

Reed's family, friends, and community gathered in front of Mather High School on the Tuesday following his death to recognize and honor his memory. Dozens spoke fondly of Reed. Many said that the youth had inspired them to take a firm stand against injustice and inequality. Reed's older sister Jasmine Bradley spoke outside the school saying, "To actually see him speaking out so millions could see him... it meant a lot to us."

"He was a powerful young man," said Derion Smith, a leader of VOYCE. "He was amazing and I always told Caleb that no matter what I'd always be by his side. Even though he's gone I'm going to keep pushing his legacy no matter what."

Tragically, Reed was one of hundreds of workers and youth killed in July in Chicago. In fact, July was the most violent month in Chicago's history in 28 years. An analysis by the *Chicago Tribune* that looked at the rise in the number of shooting victims by age found that there was a 45 percent increase as compared to the last year.

During July, Chicago saw a total of 105 murders and 584 other shooting victims. Like Reed, many of the year's shooting victims are young; 24 of these were children under 10 years old. Of the total, 222 victims were ages 17 or younger, an increase of 36 percent compared to 2019. With victims 10 and younger there was a 200 percent increase.

Reed's death was, in an immediate sense, caused by a gunshot. However, in a more profound sense, like millions of other youth and workers who have died

© World Socialist Web Site

from gun violence in cities throughout the US, Reed is a victim of a rotting social system: capitalism.

Chicago's gun violence cannot be explained outside of staggering levels of inequality in the city, coupled with a vast militarization of society more broadly. Decades of austerity measures in support of pro-business policies have created conditions of mass unemployment, homelessness, and poverty in the city.

Chicago's social crisis has been overseen by the Democratic Party, which has ruled the city for nearly 90 years.

In Chicago, over 8 percent of young people aged 16–19 are unemployed and over 20 percent aged 20–24 are out of work. Among Chicago's black working class, the number increases to an unemployment rate of 38 percent for the 20–24 age group.

The attacks on the working class in Chicago, like in every other city, intensified greatly in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. Funding for schools and other social programs was slashed, including the 2013 closure of 50 schools in working-class neighborhoods. In response to such dire social conditions, the Democratic Party-controlled political establishment in Chicago concentrated its efforts on beefing up its police force, arming it with military-grade weapons, and employing military tactics.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the political establishment has doubled down on this policy of law and order.

When faced with the mass eruptions against violence and inequality by Chicago's youth and workers, Mayor Lightfoot colluded with President Donald Trump to send a "surge" of some 200 federal agents to Chicago. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported at the time:

"While the gang violence is the ostensible target of the Trump-Lightfoot 'surge,' the building up of a police state apparatus in the country's third largest city is aimed at suppressing the social anger over historic levels of inequality and state violence. The ruling elite and both of its political parties fear the emergence of mass strikes and protests by workers in opposition to the bipartisan back-to-work drive."

The "surge" of police state agents is not aimed at providing a safe environment for the masses but rather is an anticipation of the growing opposition within the working class to capitalism. There is no doubt that the political landscape is being irreversibly altered. Workers, and particularly youth, are being politically radicalized. They see the trillions of dollars being funneled to save Wall Street while their friends, parents, and coworkers are brutalized on the streets by police, and starved of resources in their communities.

The aspirations of young people and workers for a better society and an end to the violence that killed Reed can only be achieved through the development of an independent working-class political movement hostile to both the Democratic and Republican parties, and the capitalist system they defend. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) are the only organizations with such a program.

Young workers and students who are horrified by the death of Caleb Reed, police violence, and broader social inequality must draw the necessary conclusions and take it upon themselves to develop and build the socialist movement. We urge all those interested to contact and join the IYSSE and SEP.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site