

The killing of Michael Reinoehl: A state murder

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On September 3, Michael Forest Reinoehl, 48, was shot and killed by a federal fugitive task force led by the US Marshals Service outside an apartment complex in Lacey, Washington.

Reinoehl's killing came several hours after he had been charged with the murder of Aaron "Jay" Danielson, a Trump supporter and right-wing vigilante, at a protest in Portland, Oregon, on August 29.

Reinoehl's death was a state-sanctioned killing, carried out with the support of the Justice Department and the White House. Just minutes before Reinoehl's death was announced, President Donald Trump tweeted a demand that the police take action to apprehend Danielson's killer. "Do your job, and do it fast. Everybody knows who this thug is," Trump declared.

While the precise circumstances leading to Reinoehl's death remain murky, statements by police investigators, the US Marshals and Attorney General William Barr make clear there was no attempt to arrest him alive. His death was the intended outcome of an operation meant to intimidate others opposed to police violence and set a precedent for violent state attacks on workers coming into struggle against mass unemployment and the ruling class's homicidal back-to-work and back-to school drives in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

The most chilling statement came from Attorney General William Barr, who said in a press release posted on the Justice Department's website that the killing of an "admitted Antifa member" was "a significant accomplishment in the ongoing effort to restore law and order."

Barr justified Reinoehl's extrajudicial killing by declaring that he had "attempted to escape arrest and produced a firearm." This is a well-known formulation that has often been used to justify police assassinations

since the Supreme Court gave law enforcement a green light to shoot criminal suspects based on the claim that they were fleeing and posed a threat to the public or police.

Such claims have been used to whitewash the killing of political opponents, including the FBI's efforts to destroy the left-wing Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s. Bobby Hutton, the treasurer of the Black Panthers, was killed in a shootout with the Oakland, California, police in 1968. Stripped to his pants and attempting to surrender, the 17-year-old Hutton was shot and killed by police who claimed he had attempted to flee.

Historian Edward B. Westermann notes that under Germany's Nazi regime as well as the preceding Weimar Republic, the phrase "shot while trying to escape" was frequently used "to describe the killing of the regime's putative political and racial enemies..." He explains that "in many cases, the phrase normalized the act of murder by providing a veneer of procedural legality that served as both a euphemism and a justification for murder."

The murder of Reinoehl occurred the same week that Jeremy Logan, co-chair of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, was kidnapped and placed in an unmarked van, then detained for more than a day by federal agents.

The methods used by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile—snatch squads, disappearances and extrajudicial murders of political opponents—are appearing in the United States.

Reinoehl had been active in nightly protests against police violence in Portland. He had expressed committed opposition to racism and fascism and sympathy for Antifa, but had made clear that he was not a member of any such organization.

During an interview broadcast by VICE News the same day that he was killed, Reinoehl admitted that he had shot Danielson, but he insisted that it was in self-defense. “I had no choice,” he said. “I mean, I had a choice. I could have sat there and watched them kill a friend of mine of color. But I wasn’t going to do that.”

Records unsealed on Friday show that Danielson, a member of the far-right Patriot Prayer organization, had been armed with a can of bear mace, a retractable metal baton and a hand gun in a holster on his hip when he was shot. The killing took place in the context of a provocation by pro-Trump elements, who drove pickup trucks through downtown Portland and shot paintballs and pepper spray and engaged in fistfights with anti-police violence protesters.

In his interview with VICE News, Reinoehl said that he had not turned himself in to the police because he believed they were working with far-right groups, and that he would not be safe in their custody. “They’re out hunting me,” he said. “There’s nightly posts of the hunt and where they’re going to be hunting. They made a post saying the deer are going to feel lucky this year because it’s open season on Michael right now.”

According to a statement by the Thurston County Sheriff’s Department, which is investigating the killing of Reinoehl, the suspect was shot as he ran from the task force. “During the attempt to apprehend him, shots were fired at the suspect in the vehicle and he fled from the vehicle on foot,” the department said in a statement. “Additional shots were fired at the suspect and he was pronounced deceased at the location.”

The murder of Reinoehl contrasts sharply with the treatment of 17-year-old Trump supporter and far-right militia member Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot and killed two protesters and wounded a third in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on August 25. Rittenhouse, armed with a semi-automatic weapon, was allowed to cross police lines and return to his home in Antioch, Illinois, before being arrested on murder charges by local police. He is currently being held in a juvenile detention facility in Illinois awaiting extradition to Wisconsin.

Right-wing forces, including Fox News commentators, have declared Rittenhouse a hero. They have raised more than \$1 million for his legal defense. Republican Congressman Thomas Massie hailed his “incredible restraint,” while President Trump argued that he had acted in self-defense.

The mainstream “liberal” press and the Democratic Party have been largely silent on the police murder of Reinoehl, as well as the murder of two protesters in Kenosha by Rittenhouse. As of this writing, there have been no calls for an investigation into the killing of Reinoehl by any Democratic politician, major media outlet or the American Civil Liberties Union.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his running mate Senator Kamala Harris have said nothing about Reinoehl, and Biden avoided saying anything about Rittenhouse’s victims when he was in Kenosha last week. Instead, Biden has launched a law-and-order campaign, denouncing looters and anarchists, while promoting racial identity politics as a solution to police brutality. Democratic officials at every level across the country have deployed riot police and the National Guard against peaceful protesters demanding an end to police violence and racism.

The killing of Reinoehl, robbed of his democratic right to the presumption of innocence and a jury trial, and the silence of the Democratic Party are a serious warning to the working class. These are milestones in the criminalization of left-wing dissent and state support for violent fascist vigilantes.

The Democrats will do nothing to defend the rights and lives of young people and workers who oppose the policies of the government and the daily violence and death meted out by the police agencies of the ruling elite. The basic social and democratic rights of the working class—the vast majority of the population—can be defended only through the independent mobilization of the working class in a conscious struggle to put an end to capitalism, the source of inequality, war and dictatorship, and establish socialism.



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