

The trial of Derek Chauvin and the epidemic of police murder in America

Trévon Austin
31 March 2021

Wednesday concluded the third day in the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis, Minnesota police officer who knelt on George Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes last May.

The testimony over the last three days has confirmed what millions of workers around the world already know: Floyd's death was a brutal police murder in cold blood. Occurring in the midst of the pandemic, it was a particularly graphic display of the nature of the apparatus of repression and violence that goes by the name of "law enforcement."

One after another, witnesses recalled their shock, horror, and outrage as they saw officers pin Floyd on the pavement as he begged for his life. Nearly every witness that has taken the stand so far—people of different races and backgrounds—has come to tears while being questioned or shown footage reminding them of what transpired on May 25, 2020.

Minneapolis firefighter Genevieve Hansen, who is white, testified that she begged officers to let her take Floyd's pulse. Hansen recalled how officers refused to allow her to assist Floyd, even after she identified herself as a firefighter. Hansen teared up as she recounted the helplessness she felt as Chauvin continued to kneel on Floyd after she could tell he was not conscious.

Darnella Frazier, an African American teenager who recorded the viral bystander video of the incident, told jurors she has stayed up some nights "apologizing and apologizing to George Floyd for not doing more and not physically interacting and not saving his life."

Alyssa Funari, another bystander who recorded events, cried as she explained that she wanted to intervene but was unable to because "there was a higher power there"—a reference to officers who pushed witnesses to the crime away and threatened them with

mace.

The prosecution played harrowing bodycam footage Wednesday, in which Floyd could be seen pleading with officers, telling them that he was scared and begging not to be shot. In the footage, officers continued to pin Floyd to the pavement even after one acknowledged Floyd had passed out.

Floyd's brutal murder at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department evoked an outpouring of empathy and anger from workers across the globe. Protests began locally in Minneapolis the day after Floyd's death and eventually spread to over 2,000 cities in over 60 countries. An estimated 15 to 26 million people protested at some point in the US, making the demonstrations the largest in US history.

The demonstrations were of a multi-ethnic, multi-racial and international character, and workers actively fought efforts to divide the struggle along racial lines.

While the protests were sparked by the killing of Floyd, deeper issues were driving them. In late May, the death toll from the coronavirus pandemic in the US reached 100,000. Millions were out of work and without income while Congress provided trillions to Wall Street, only offering scraps to workers. The ruling class, led by the Trump administration, had initiated its homicidal back-to-work campaign, a policy which has been continued by President Joe Biden, driving the death toll above 560,000 today.

The ruling class responded to the protests by sending police on a militarized campaign of repression. Both Democrats and Republicans called on police and National Guard forces to terrorize the population. More than 14,000 people were arrested during the protests, charged with petty offenses such as violating curfews or blocking roadways. Police routinely violated the democratic rights of journalists, arresting 128 in 2020,

a record for a single year. At least 19 people died during the police crackdown.

On June 1, Trump—who encouraged police violence throughout his administration—threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act to deploy the military across the country and effectively declare martial law. This response was not simply or even primarily aimed at the popular protests against police violence. It reflected the fear in the ruling class of growing social anger over its homicidal response to the pandemic. The threat of dictatorship found its ultimate political expression in the attempted fascist coup in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021.

While supporting the police crackdown, Democrats worked on a parallel track. They sought to direct outrage over Floyd’s murder and the broader epidemic of police violence into a campaign based on stoking racial division. Workers were told that police killings were a racial matter that could be solved by making Kamala Harris the first female, African American and Asian American Vice President. The Black Lives Matter movement was heavily promoted and organizations associated with the movement were flooded with tens of millions of dollars by major corporations.

The Democrats, however, are no less culpable than the Republicans for the epidemic of police violence. Before George Floyd, there was Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, when protests were met by a militarized response overseen by the Obama administration. No doubt there will be, during the Biden administration, further outrages, some caught on camera, the majority not. According to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, there has been no significant reduction in the rate at which police kill people under Biden.

Since mappingpoliceviolence.org began keeping data in 2013, police have killed over 1,000 people every year. On average, US police kill more than 3 people every day. Already in 2021, police have killed more than 200 people.

Police killed 1,127 people in 2020, even in the midst of the pandemic. Of those, 457 were white. Year after year, white people account for the largest share of individuals killed by police. While racism plays a role, and the most backward and fascist sentiments are encouraged within the police, the disproportionate

number of minorities murdered is primarily a product of police patrolling the most vulnerable and impoverished communities.

The prevalence of police violence in the United States is, at its root, a class question, not a racial issue. It is the noxious product of a society characterized by unprecedented levels of social inequality. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a plutocracy has only increased over the past year, with the massive bailout of Wall Street fueling the rise of the pandemic profiteers.

Any struggle against police violence cannot be waged on a racial basis. Last year’s protests demonstrated the unity and power of the working class. The only way forward is a socialist program, which rejects artificial barriers and unites workers along their common class interests. The impassioned responses of the witnesses in Chauvin’s trial were not determined by their race, but by their humanity and empathy for the thousands of workers killed by police every year.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in the days after Floyd’s killing, “How shall the death of George Floyd be avenged? What is the way forward? The fight against police brutality must be fused with the growing movement of the working class against unsafe working conditions, mass unemployment, social inequality and mass poverty. It is a fight against the capitalist system and for socialism.”

Ten months after Floyd’s death, as the wave of police violence continues, as the ruling class’s response to the pandemic has produced its horrific results, and as workers throughout the world enter into struggle against inequality, dictatorship and war, the necessity for such a struggle is more urgent than ever.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact