

Why have Ben Crump and Al Sharpton taken up the case of Hunter Brittain?

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On July 6, a memorial service for Hunter Brittain was held at Beebe High School in central Arkansas. Present at the memorial service were Benjamin Crump and Devon Jacob, the attorneys for the family of George Floyd, alongside the racialist political charlatan Reverend Al Sharpton.

Brittain, a 17-year-old white youth, was gunned down by since-fired Lonoke County Sheriff's Sergeant Michael Davis, while Brittain was attempting to place a blue antifreeze canister behind his truck tire to prevent it from rolling back into Davis' squad car during a traffic stop. According to eye-witness and friend Jordan King, the deputy issued no commands prior to opening fire.

The character of the shooting—a white, unarmed youth gunned down by a white officer—explodes the racialist narrative pushed the Democratic Party, its aligned media outlets including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and the pseudo-left groups which operate in its orbit. They frame the phenomenon of police violence solely in terms of race—with the focus almost exclusively on the disproportionate number of African American victims—stripping it from the broader and primary class context.

However, Brittain's murder, and the protests which it has sparked in Lonoke County, and the attention it has begun to attract more broadly, have exposed this threadbare conceit. In fact, this is the first time in the long careers of Crump and Sharpton in which they have felt compelled to take on a case involving a white youth who was shot by police.

During the memorial service, Sharpton—a self-admitted informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and long-time advocate for the Democratic Party—was compelled to allude to the class character of police violence. He said, “I don’t know if Hunter was in a rich neighborhood, with a certain clothes [sic] on that night, driving a certain car, whether this policeman would have acted that way... I don’t know what the reason is, but I do know an unarmed 17-year-old young man should have been given the benefit of due process, and not be shot down and not be considered guilty until proven innocent.”

Given the largely white audience, Crump and Sharpton had to sheath their typical racialist demagoguery, instead making appeals for “unity” in order to channel opposition to police violence behind the political establishment—including Arkansas’ Republican governor Asa Hutchison. “We came here today to all proclaim a unity [with] President Biden [and] the governor of Arkansas,” said Crump.

Crump, who Sharpton has dubbed “Black America’s Attorney

General,” called the police shooting of Brittain “one of the most significant” cases in the fight to push Congress to pass police reform legislation, in particular the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act.

While they have seized on Brittain’s death to drum up political support for this legislation, backed by the Biden administration and congressional Democrats, neither Crump, Sharpton, nor the NAACP have sought to highlight the many other cases where white working class people have been killed in the same manner as their black counterparts. In fact, of the approximately 1,000 people killed every year by the police, the largest share are white.

Just prior to the one-year anniversary of Floyd’s death, footage was released showing police officers at the jail in Marshall County, Tennessee kneeling on a hogtied man’s back for approximately four minutes. William Jennette, a 48-year-old white man, who was arrested “for non-violent offenses by members of the Marshall County Sheriff’s Office,” died during the encounter on May 6, 2020, just days before police murdered Floyd in a similar fashion.

In the video, Jennette is heard pleading for his life, and that he could not breathe, “Help! They’re going to kill me!” Police are heard taunting him, “You shouldn’t be able to breathe, you stupid bastard.” Notwithstanding the Marshall County Medical Examiner’s Office ruling Jennette’s death as a homicide, a grand jury declined to charge any of the officers involved, although Jennette possessed what the advocates of racial politics call “white skin privilege.”

Not long after the guilty verdict of Derek Chauvin was announced, Biden declared that Floyd’s death had exposed “the systemic racism that is a stain on our nation’s soul. The knee on the neck of justice for Black Americans... The pain, the exhaustion that Black and brown Americans experience every single day.”

Those who appeal to “systemic racism” as the cause of police brutality cannot explain why the largest number of those killed by the police every year are white, nor why the overwhelming majority of minority victims of police violence are working class and the killings take place in poor, working class neighborhoods. Because of police racism, black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than whites. But virtually all the victims of police violence, white, black and Hispanic, are drawn from the working class.

The arrival of Crump and Sharpton in Lonoke County should not be taken as a sign of good faith. The two are seizing on the death

of the white youth in order to promote President Joe Biden's mild reforms in policing and still maintain the fiction of "white privilege." They are even suggesting that the Brittain case is such a novelty that it could compel the Senate to vote for the police reform bill.

"That is going to be looked at differently because he wasn't a teenager who was a child of color," Crump told CNN on Monday. "Because we've always said that our white brothers and sisters couldn't fathom their child being killed by the police. That people are supposed to protect them. But that's a reality that parents of children-of-color literally deal with every day of their lives."

The horrific police murder of Hunter Brittain is not a rare, let alone first-time experience, something that will bring home to previously apathetic "whites" that their children are just as vulnerable as black children. On the contrary, as a WSWS analysis in 2018 demonstrated statistically:

Police violence is focused overwhelmingly on men lowest on the socio-economic ladder: in rural areas outside the South, predominately white men; in the Southwest, disproportionately Hispanic men; in mid-size and major cities, disproportionately black men. Significantly, in the rural South, where the population is racially mixed, white men and black men are killed by police at nearly identical rates. What unites these victims of police violence is not their race, but their class status (as well as, of course, their gender).

Crump is not a stupid man, and must acknowledge this reality, saying, in his interview with CNN: I want to be able to talk to senators on both sides of the aisle and say, 'This isn't just about black children, it's also about brown children and white children and Asian children ... This is about our citizens being brutalized or killed because the federal government hasn't acted.'

Sharpton too has to admit the commonality of the experience of police violence, saying he had to "take the risk" of attending and addressing Brittain's memorial service.

"I think it may have been three-or-400 people there, maybe 20 black, and for them to give me five or six standing ovations showed that this is a real possibility of us bridging, a real police accountability movement that is based on race, and class," Sharpton said, adding, "As I said in the eulogy, that if Hunter had been a rich guy in another part of the white community, would they have shot him like that?"

But this grudging acceptance of the class character of police violence—which Sharpton, of course, places only *alongside* race—is a necessary concession to the reality of the Brittain case. They make this concession only in order to further their efforts to subordinate the working class, black and white, to the corporate-controlled Democratic Party, which defends the police unconditionally as the last line of defense for the capitalist class.

Between the 2013 and 2020, which encompasses the Obama and Trump years, 98.3 percent of killings by police have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime, according to

MappingPoliceViolence.org. According to its proponents, the George Floyd Act would save lives by "banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants," while additionally mandating that "deadly force be used only as a last resort."

Crump and Sharpton's appeals to the Democratic establishment highlight their real agenda behind intervening in the Brittain case. When asked about calls to "defund" the police, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said, "We want to work with our police departments. There are many who take pride in their work, and we want to be able to make sure the focus is on them."

On June 23, the day Brittain was killed, President Biden said it is "not a time to turn our backs on law enforcement." Biden also announced that \$350 billion in pandemic relief funds, allotted to the state governments under the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan enacted in March, may be used to fund police departments.

Last week, Alderman Anthony Beale in Chicago, Illinois, a black Democrat who represents the city's South Side 9th ward, raised the demand for National Guard troops to be deployed to defend the most affluent sections of the city to relieve police of "their duty," so that they may return to patrolling impoverished neighborhoods. Beale said, "We need to bring in the National Guard to secure the perimeter of downtown and to work along with the police to free up more officers to come from downtown back into the communities, where we can help flood the communities where resources have been taken out of."

These are but a few examples of the reactionary result of the racialist politics pushed by the Democratic Party, the very political party behind which Crump and Sharpton work to corral popular anger over police violence.

The struggle to end racism and to end police violence is bound up with the fight for socialism. Police violence cannot be explained solely as a racial phenomenon. The class nature of police violence is summed up by Leon Trotsky, "The worker who becomes a policeman in the service of the capitalist state, is a bourgeois cop, not a worker," i.e., an enforcer of the state, a protector of bourgeois rule and law.



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