Democrats dominate funeral service held for Patrick Lyoya in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kevin Reed
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The family and friends of 26-year-old African refugee Patrick Lyoya gathered on Friday for a funeral service at a church in Grand Rapids, Michigan for the young man who was killed execution-style by a police officer during a traffic stop on the city's southeast side on April 4.

The Lyoya family and members of the Congolese community began arriving at 9:30 a.m. at Renaissance Church of God in Christ to pay their final respects. The service began at noon, included a Congolese choir dressed in traditional African garb and was translated to Swahili.

Patrick Lyoya, who arrived with his family in the US from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2014, died instantly when a white Grand Rapids officer pinned him to the ground during a scuffle, placed a handgun against the back of his head and pulled the trigger.

Patrick was the oldest of six children of Peter and Dorcas Lyoya. He had two young children of his own. He was born in Uvira, a city in South Kivu Province with a population of 590,000 on the north end of Lake Tanganyika.

Patrick came to the US from DRC at the age of 18 and attended Everett High School in Lansing. The printed obituary described him as "a warm and loving person who would do anything for his family and friends" who liked dancing, playing and watching soccer and was known as the "family jokester."

The platform of speakers at the funeral was a roster of local, state and national African American Democratic Party officials and operatives. Among them were Reverend Al Sharpton, who delivered the eulogy, US Representative Brenda Lawrence, Michigan Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist and Kent County Commissioner Robert Womack.

According to initial reports from the Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD), the officer pulled over Lyoya because his license plate was not registered to the vehicle he was driving. However, in subsequent statements, GRPD Chief Eric Winstrom said the precise reason for the stop has not been released.

Although the officer's patrol car was outfitted with a license-plate reader that automatically enters the license plate into a database, the GRPD has said that whether this played a role in the stop is part of the Michigan State Police (MSP) investigation into the shooting of Lyoya. The policeman's bodycam footage also recorded the officer telling Lyoya that he was pulled over for the license plate violation.

Whatever the reason for the stop, the entire incident was captured on multiple video streams, including the smartphone of the passenger in Lyoya's car who recorded the scuffle on the front lawn of a residential property up to the moment when the officer pulled the trigger.

At first, the police and Kent County Prosecutor Chris Becker refused to release the four videos to the public on the grounds that they were part of the MSP investigation and would be released when the investigation was complete. However, two related developments forced authorities to publicly release the video on April 13.

The first was the fact that, after police allowed Patrick's father Peter Lyoya to view the videos, and even though the law enforcement officials told him that he should not tell anyone about what he had seen, he refused and began sharing the facts of what had happened publicly.

Secondly, a daily protest outside police headquarters in downtown Grand Rapids demanding the release of the videos and for the officer to be identified and prosecuted for murder was gathering growing support. Chief Winstrom and prosecutor Becker are still maintaining that the officer's name will not be released unless charges are brought against him.

A full two weeks after the shooting, the Kent County Prosecutor told News Channel 3 in Grand Rapids that he has received more than 200 phone calls about the case. The news report said Becker is waiting for the MSP

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investigation to be completed and then he will review the evidence and "consult with his office's chief assistant prosecutor, senior attorneys and other prosecutors, if needed."

The likelihood that Becker will come back with no charges against the still unnamed officer was a subject of speeches made by those who addressed Lyoya's funeral. During his eulogy, Sharpton said he asked the Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Justice (DoJ) on Friday to investigate the case and he also reported that the Biden administration is aware of Lyoya's death.

Sharpton said, "We will not leave this to local prosecutors. … The local prosecutor can think that it's all going to end with him. No, it's going to begin at the same time. We are not going to see this covered up by local authorities." He also said the DoJ needs to investigate not only Lyoya's death but the MPD investigation itself.

With long-time ties to the Democratic Party nationally, Sharpton expressed the concerns of a faction of the ruling elite that the Lyoya murder could ignite a mass movement such as that which erupted in the US and internationally two years ago following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

He called for the release of the name of the officer who killed Lyoya and drew a connection between the protection of the Grand Rapids policeman and the recent acquittal of the men who were involved in a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan.

Sharpton asked, "Is this Michigan … the Michigan that just not long ago you failed to convict men that threatened to kidnap the governor. Now you're going to protect the name of a policeman that shot somebody in the back of the head? Is this Michigan 2022 or Mississippi 1952?"

Civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who is representing the Lyoya family, promoted the idea that the political leadership of Grand Rapids—a national center of far-right and fascistic Republican politics—needed to step up and make a difference. Crump said, "We believe that the whole world is watching Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the leadership gets to write how this story will end." The attorney then asked, "Will it be one where we achieve equal justice for Patrick Lyoya and others? … How will this tragedy be remembered?"

Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence promoted her role as vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus saying, "This is personal to me. This is my family; you are my family and my community and if I don't stand up who will. I was sent to Congress to stand and fight for my people."

Not one of the speakers put forward any explanation for the unending wave of police violence across the US that has killed more than 1,000 people per year since 2010. There was no discussion of the devastating social conditions that lie behind the brutality meted out by law enforcement against working class and poor people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Or that the police are deployed by the state to protect the interests of private property.

Although very little has been written or said about it, the fact that Patrick Lyoya was a worker in an auto parts factory in Grand Rapids is highly significant. Like millions of young workers in the US, Lyoya faced the common experience of struggling to make a living and raise a family on a factory worker's wages.

None of this was addressed by the assembly of Democrats who spoke at the funeral. These political representatives of the capitalist system, which is responsible for these conditions that include the state apparatus of nonstop police violence and murder, have nothing to say about the reality of life for the working class in America today.

Workers and young people—both those who are born in the US and those who have arrived as immigrants or refugees—must not place confidence in the appeals of Sharpton and others for the federal government to address the crime committed against Patrick Lyoya. The Biden administration and the Democrats have made it clear that they are committed to "law and order" and building up the police under conditions where the struggles of the working class are increasing across the US and around the world.

The only way to put an end to police violence is through the unity of the working class of all racial, ethnic and national backgrounds in a common struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

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