

Mississippi grand jury fails to indict woman whose accusations led to murder of Emmett Till 67 years ago

Fred Mazelis
11 August 2022

A grand jury in Leflore County, Mississippi, has refused to indict the woman whose accusations led directly to the August 1955 murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, the brutal racist killing that helped to spark the mass US civil rights movement.

The grand jury, after hearing seven hours of testimony in the case, concluded that there was insufficient evidence to bring kidnapping and manslaughter charges against Carolyn Bryant Donham. Donham, at that time married to Roy Bryant, had claimed that Till, a black youth from Chicago who was visiting Mississippi relatives for part of that summer, had made advances to her in the grocery store that she owned with her husband in a small town in the northwest part of the state.

Several days later, on August 28, 1955, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, abducted Till from his great-uncle's home at 2 a.m. in the morning. They beat him beyond recognition and shot him, then tossed his body into the nearby Tallahatchie River, where it was soon discovered.

Roy Bryant and Milam were quickly tried for the murder of Till, and even more quickly acquitted by an all-white jury which deliberated barely an hour, an example of the kind of racist "justice" that was the rule in the Jim Crow South for three-quarters of a century. Carolyn Bryant took the witness stand and repeated her accusation. Bryant and Milam, safe from new murder trials under the double jeopardy clause of the US Constitution's Fifth Amendment, brazenly confessed to the crime less than a year later. They lived for decades longer, Milam until 1980 and Bryant until 1994.

Donham, now 88 years old and living in North Carolina, was reported to have been a passenger in the

car that abducted Till. She was also reported at one point as having recanted her original accusation, a claim she later denied.

Over the past 67 years the case of Emmett Till has remained at the forefront of popular consciousness, and various local and national government bodies have on several occasions felt obliged to reinvestigate the case. A Mississippi grand jury declined to indict Carolyn Donham in 2007. The US Department of Justice opened and then closed a "cold case" investigation in 2004 after it went nowhere. The federal authorities reopened the case yet again in 2017, closing it once more, in December 2021, after concluding that they could not prove Donham's guilt.

In the last few months, even after nearly seven decades, new information came to light. In June, an arrest warrant for Carolyn Bryant was discovered in the basement of the Leflore County Courthouse. Apparently the original arrest warrant for Milam and Roy Bryant had also included Bryant's wife, but the warrant was never served, with the excuse that she could not be found.

A few weeks later, an unpublished 109-page memoir of Carolyn Bryant Donham was leaked to the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting. The memoir, dictated 14 years ago to her daughter-in-law, makes the grotesque claim that, "I always felt like a victim as well as Emmett."

Despite the new evidence, the Leflore County grand jury failed to indict Donham. The county DA, Dewayne Richardson, who is African American, instead issued an empty statement: "The murder of Emmett Till remains an unforgettable tragedy in this country and the thoughts and prayers of this nation continue to be with

the family of Emmett Till.”

With the last party responsible for this crime close to 90 years old, it is likely that the murder of Emmett Till will not be brought before a courtroom again. This only underscores the importance of learning its lessons.

Mamie Till, the mother of the victim, insisted that his funeral take place with an open casket, so that the whole world could see the reality of racist brutality. This courageous stand reflected the growing determination to sweep away the whole racist Jim Crow segregation system that had taken hold after the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era. The burning anger at the murder of Emmett Till helped to fuel the Montgomery Bus Boycott against segregation a few months later, followed over the next decade by the lunch counter sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the 1963 March on Washington, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s voter registration drives, and many other mass mobilizations.

The struggle against Jim Crow could no longer be held back by the two-party capitalist system which had served it so well since the turn of the 20th century and even before. The Democrats, through their Dixiecrat wing in the “solid South,” played the major role.

The Southern movement against Jim Crow received wide support in the North, including within the working class. The growing integration and militancy of industrial workers played a key role, despite the bureaucratic stranglehold of the AFL-CIO. The merged labor federation had been founded in the same year as Emmett Till’s murder, and one of its aims was precisely to strengthen the bureaucracy and hold back the threat of a unified and militant working class.

The Cold War of the 1950s also worked to force the hand of US big business and its political establishment, as the foreign policy aims of US imperialism, with its “democratic” pretenses in the conflict with the Soviet Union, conflicted with the old system of rigid segregation. The Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation came in 1954, one year before the lynching of Emmett Till.

Subsequent decades confirmed the fundamental limitations of the civil rights movement. The refusal of the movement’s leadership to challenge capitalism and the two political parties through which it ruled meant that it could not meet the aspirations of the many millions of workers who fought during the 1950s and

60s. The civil rights reforms of nearly 60 years ago laid bare even more clearly the essential class issues, and the need to unite the working class to fight against the system of capitalist exploitation.

The inability to bring the last perpetrator in the murder of Emmett Till to justice is an expression of the more fundamental inability of capitalism to meet the needs of the working class. The integration of the capitalist political establishment, in the South as well as elsewhere in the US, is for the purpose of defending the status quo, as illustrated by the action of the Leflore County grand jury under its African American District Attorney.

Because of the deepening crisis, workers of all races and ethnicities have faced deepening attacks on living standards and democratic rights after the gains of the 1960s. The division of labor between the Republican and Democratic parties continues, even if in a different form. The Republicans have assumed the role previously played by the Southern racist Democrats, going even further in the direction of fascism.

The Democrats, on the other hand, pose as opponents of racism for the most cynical and sinister purposes. Last March, President Joe Biden signed federal anti-lynching legislation, decades after it could have made a difference. The Democrats, from the White House on down, will seek to use Till’s case the way they are trying to use the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade*, as a talking point for their election campaign lies, trampling on the real legacy of working class struggle against racism in order to hustle votes for austerity, while COVID continues to rage and the preparations for a third world war continue.

The most important lesson of the Emmett Till case and the history of the mass movement it helped to initiate is that the fight against all forms of racism and reaction requires the mobilization of the working class and the fight for its political independence in the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact