

Racially charged brawl erupts at Montgomery, Alabama riverfront

Emma Arceneaux
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Last Saturday, a violent fight broke at Riverfront Park in Montgomery, Alabama after a group of private boaters, all white, assaulted the co-captain of a tourist riverboat, who is black. From there the confrontation escalated as bystanders and other workers came to the aid of the captain, Damien Pickett, eventually drawing in over a dozen people. The disturbing incident has attracted national attention and videos captured by bystanders have gone viral on social media.

Three men who attacked the co-captain—Richard Roberts, 48; Allen Todd, 23; and Zachary “Chase” Shipman, 25—have collectively been charged on four counts of assault in the third degree. As of Wednesday morning, Roberts had turned himself in to authorities in nearby Selma, while Todd and Shipman had not. The three men are all residents of Alabama.

The confrontation began when the group of boaters refused to move their pontoon, which they had docked in a space reserved for the Harriott II, a tourist riverboat. The private boaters, who were apparently intoxicated, responded to requests to move their boat with obscene gestures and provocative language. Following a 45-minute stalemate, a 16-year-old employee of a smaller vessel drove Pickett to the dock, where he attempted to reason with the men.

Eventually, Pickett attempted to unmoor and move their pontoon, at which point one of the men assaulted him. After the two had exchanged a few punches, multiple other men joined in and began beating Pickett. The teenage employee of the smaller boat, who is white, was also assaulted by the men. From there, multiple people came to the aid of Pickett and the fight expanded.

Videos show that after the initial brawl seemed to have ended, another group of people, who were black, approached the pontoon. One of them punched a man who was on the pontoon and the fight reignited and drew in over a dozen people, including women from the boat, one of whom can be seen in the video being beaten by multiple people at once.

According to CNN, the mother of the 16-year-old who was assaulted stated in sworn testimony that the men had used

racist slurs prior to the fight.

At a press conference Tuesday, Montgomery Police Chief Darryl Albert did not explicitly confirm or deny this. In response to a question whether the men had used racial epithets, Albert stated that “there were obscene gestures, comments and innuendos.” He said that in consultation with state law enforcement, the Montgomery District Attorney and Federal Bureau of Investigation officials, the possibility of issuing charges related to hate crimes and incitement of a riot were considered, but that the evidence was insufficient to press charges of that nature.

Albert stated that the investigation is ongoing and that with new evidence being gathered from multiple videos posted online, he expects more charges to be forthcoming.

As of now, few personal details are available about the men who initiated the fight, though the captain of Harriott II, Jim Kittrell, told local news that they are part of a group of pontoon boaters with whom the crew has had “trouble ... in the past.” He cited an incident a few years prior when members of the group stole a golf cart from the riverboat and parked it in a nearby hotel lobby, which he referred to as a “prank.”

Shipman has been identified as the owner of Vasser’s Mini Mart in Selma. He initially attempted to distance himself from the event by posting a since-deleted video online in which he claimed not to have participated in the fight. Subsequent videos by bystanders disproved this claim.

The assault against Pickett and the ensuing fight, which unfolded largely along racial lines, came one day after former president Donald Trump attended a Republican Party fundraising event in Montgomery, where he gave his first public speech after being indicted last week on felony charges related to his attempt to overthrow the 2020 election.

In his speech and in social media posts following his indictment, Trump sought to incite violence against federal prosecutors and officials throughout the Democratic Party. Atlanta District Attorney Fani Willis, who is investigating Trump, has already received racist death threats following

attack ads by the Trump campaign.

The ex-president has also made thinly veiled racist attacks against Washington D.C., where his jury trial for seeking to overthrow the 2020 election is set to be held and the largest share of the population is African-American. He has called the city a drug-infested swamp and a “high crime embarrassment to our nation and, indeed, the world.”

In an overtly xenophobic diatribe Friday night, he viciously attacked immigrants, claiming that countries around the world had “emptied their prisons” and “dumped” their prisoners into the United States. In addition to vowing to carry out the “largest domestic deportation operation in American history,” he promised to reinstate a federal travel ban against people from “majority Muslim” countries.

While there may not be a direct link between Trump’s appearance in Montgomery and the events on Saturday, the fact is that Trump and the entire Republican Party have consciously sought to whip up a reactionary atmosphere and have emboldened outright fascist groups, such as the Proud Boys, to carry out attacks against their political enemies, left-wing movements and the broader working class.

These include the fascist plot to assassinate Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer for enforcing limited public health measures at the start of the pandemic in 2020; the murder of anti-police violence protesters by Kyle Rittenhouse in 2020; and multiple mass killings against immigrants earlier this year in Texas.

The Democratic Party has contributed to this poisonous environment by covering up for the Republican Party, whom they view as essential “colleagues” and partners in the war against Russia in Ukraine, and by incessantly promoting, in their own way, racial politics.

There is a deep hostility in broad sections of the population to racism, evident in the widespread condemnation of the attack against the riverboat captain. However, the working class must reject the glorification and propagation of racist views and divisions, which has found expression in reenactments of the fight on social media and online memes celebrating a folding chair that was wielded by one of the black men in the fight.

Under conditions where the objective economic, social and political crisis of capitalism is bringing workers of all races and backgrounds into a common struggle, both factions of the bourgeoisie are seeking to divide and disorient the working class along racial and ethnic lines. To them, an incident such as occurred Saturday is a welcome diversion from the erupting class struggle, one they have seized upon to insist that society is fundamentally divided along racial, not class, lines.

No small part in this effort has been played by upper-middle class racist ideologues aligned with the

Democratic Party, such as Nikole Hannah-Jones, who chimed in on Twitter, stating, “If you understand the history of Montgomery—one of the most prolific slave-trading cities in the US turned brutally repressive apartheid regimes after, and majority Black but JUST got its first Black mayor—it gives so much more perspective to the video.”

Hannah-Jones, the creator of the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” has built her lucrative career by falsifying American history along racial lines, seeking to discredit the democratic content of the American Revolution and the Civil War, which abolished slavery in the United States.

New York Times columnist Charles Blow wrote along similar lines Wednesday, stating that the event in Montgomery is part of “an unending stream of incidents in which Black people are publicly victimized, with no one willing or able to intervene or render aid.”

In addition to the fact that videos show that a young white worker attempted to stop the attack on Pickett, the history of Montgomery demonstrates that workers of all races have united to fight oppression and injustice. This includes in the three Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights marches in 1965, the largest of which brought together tens of thousands of supporters, both black and white. During this important episode, a white civil rights fighter from Detroit, Viola Liuzzo, was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan as she and Leroy Moton, another civil rights worker, drove marchers back and forth between Montgomery and Selma after the rally.

The crisis confronting the entire working class on a world scale, including the skyrocketing cost of living, attacks on democratic rights, the threat of dictatorship, and the escalating war in Ukraine, can only be fought on the basis of a unified struggle of all workers against the capitalist system, which is ruthlessly defended by both Republican and Democratic politicians of all races.



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