

100 years since the birth of Viola Liuzzo (1925-1965), martyr of the civil rights movement

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April 11 marks a century since the birth of Viola Gregg Liuzzo, the Detroit mother of five murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama in 1965 during the height of the civil rights movement. We are republishing an article from April 10, 2015, on 50 years since Liuzzo's death, written by Helen Halyard. Helen, a longtime leader of the Trotskyist movement in the US, died in November 2023. This reposting is a tribute to both women.

In 2004, following the release of the documentary about Viola Liuzzo's life and death, Home of the Brave, directed by Paolo di Florio, the WSWs interviewed Mary Liuzzo Lilleboe, Viola's daughter, as well as the director. In September 2004, the film was shown at the Detroit Film Theatre, with members of the Liuzzo family in attendance. In 2023, MSNBC interviewed Anthony Liuzzo Jr. about memories of his mother.

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On the evening of March 25, 1965, Viola Liuzzo, the 39-year-old mother of five children, was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan following the march from Selma to Montgomery in support of voting rights and against Jim Crow segregation. Liuzzo, the wife of a Teamsters Union business agent, was a student at Wayne State University in Detroit.

The shooting death of Liuzzo took place on Route 80 in Lowndesboro, Alabama, as she and Leroy Moton, another civil rights worker, drove marchers back and forth from Montgomery to Selma following the rally.

Members of the Ku Klux Klan, enraged by the success of the demonstration and determined to use racist violence to punish civil rights fighters, were lying in wait. About half way between Selma and Montgomery, a red-and-white Impala pulled alongside Liuzzo's car and fired five shots. She was killed instantly, and the car skidded into the ditch.

Moton, totally covered in Liuzzo's blood, narrowly escaped by pretending to be dead as the Klansmen stopped to check on their handiwork. Gary Thomas Rowe, an FBI informant, was in the Impala when the shots were fired. Rowe's knowledge of the murder and presence in the car meant that the FBI was complicit in this heinous killing. Reports of Liuzzo's death on the televised evening news that day shocked many millions across the US and soon thereafter around the world.

Viola Liuzzo's life is chronicled in *From Selma to Sorrow—The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo*, by Mary Stanton. She was born Viola Fauver Gregg on April 11, 1925, and her life was typical of many workers from the Detroit area, including those who joined the struggle for civil rights.

The Gregg family grew up in California, Pennsylvania, a small mining town on the Monongahela River, about 30 miles south of Pittsburgh and less than 50 miles from the West Virginia border. Viola's father, Heber Gregg, lost his left hand in a mining explosion. The accident forced the family to move to Tennessee and then to Georgia, where they struggled to get by during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Greggs moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, in 1942, where Heber looked for work at Ford's new Willow Run Bomber Plant. This was just one year after a long and bitter struggle to establish the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the Ford Motor Company, the last of the big auto companies to be unionized. On June 20, 1941, a contract was signed with what was then known as the UAW-CIO. Despite the efforts of the company to keep workers divided along racial lines, black and white workers, recognizing that their enemy was the employer and not workers of a different skin color, came together in the bitter struggle to build the union at Ford.

Liuzzo was raised to oppose racial segregation. Even as a young child, Stanton explains, "She understood that as poor as the Gregg family was they could expect to enter the front door of a movie theater if they had the price of a ticket, while Black people, no matter how much money they had, were forced to enter by a side door and sit in the balcony called 'nigger heaven.' "

Viola and her parents were deeply hostile to all manifestations of racial discrimination. In an interview after her death, Liuzzo's mother said that her daughter "was tender toward anyone in distress" and explained that she had been concerned with human rights all her life.

The mass civil rights movement of the 1960s was met by racist violence that claimed the lives of many. The many civil rights martyrs included the four young girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing in 1963; Mississippi NAACP activist Medgar Evers, also in 1963; and civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, in 1964.

The march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965 was originally organized to protest the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was killed by Alabama State troopers. Jackson, a 26-year-old church deacon from Marion, Alabama, was murdered as he attempted to protect his mother from troopers' nightsticks during an earlier demonstration. Jackson was so severely beaten by troopers on February 18, 1965, that he died eight days later in the hospital. No one was ever prosecuted for this brutal slaying.

In the course of the protest against Jackson's murder, on March 7, 1965, some 600 marchers had gone six blocks before they were

assailed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by state and local police using billy clubs and tear gas. The marchers were forced to turn back to Selma. The day became known as “Bloody Sunday” because of the brute force and violence used against the peaceful protesters.

Liuzzo was horrified as she watched the news that evening in Detroit. She viewed the attack on the demonstrators as an assault on the rights of all working people. Prior to the demonstration, she had been involved in a number of activities on the Wayne State University campus. Liuzzo had returned to school at age 36, and while at Wayne State had become active in civil rights and political activities.

It was Bloody Sunday that convinced her to travel from Detroit to Selma. When a number of other Wayne State University students pulled out at the last moment, she continued on alone to Alabama.

Viola Liuzzo’s determination to participate in the struggle reflected great changes taking place in the US in the 1960s. The struggle in Selma was part of a growth of militancy and political awareness that would find expression later in the decade in the fight against the Vietnam War as well as a massive strike wave involving many sections of the working class. The mass movement for civil rights came only a few decades after the explosive battles out of which the industrial unions were formed.

The fight against Jim Crow segregation drew in white workers and youth as well as African Americans from the North and the South, as was evident in the 1963 March on Washington. Despite the semi-official character of this demonstration, held under the auspices of both the civil rights organizations and a section of the trade unions, the crowd of 250,000 in the nation’s capital was largely working class and multiracial in composition. It gathered under the slogan of “Jobs and Freedom.”

Not only was Liuzzo murdered, but the FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover, covered up its own criminal role by launching a smear campaign against the civil rights activist. Within days of her death, material was leaked to the press by the FBI, in a vicious campaign that included false allegations that she had used drugs and that she had been intimate with civil rights worker Leroy Moton, the young black man who was with her when she died.

Following Liuzzo’s murder, there were media and official charges that she was irresponsible for leaving her children and husband behind to make the trip to the south. As one of her daughters, Mary Liuzzo Lilleboe, recently told the *Detroit News*, “I think all of us would say that our lives have been really rich, we’ve gotten a lot by being our mother’s children. One of the most damaging things that people said to us was that our mother didn’t love us, or she wouldn’t have gone down there. But the love I have received from people because I am my mother’s daughter, that’s helped, because it was absolutely the way I experienced my mother’s love.”

No one was ever convicted for the murder of Viola Liuzzo. The first trial of the three KKK killers fingered by FBI informant Rowe ended in a hung jury, the second in an acquittal. The three Klansmen were finally convicted in a third trial on charges of violating Liuzzo’s civil rights, with each sentenced to 10 years in prison.

After learning about the role of the FBI, in particular its informant Gary Rowe, the Liuzzo family filed a lawsuit against the government to uncover the truth about her murder.

A ruling in May 1983 ended with a judge dismissing the plaintiffs’ claims, ruling that “Rowe did not kill, nor did he do or say things causing others to kill. He was there to provide information, and his failure to take steps to stop the planned violence by uncovering himself and aborting his mission cannot place liability on the

government.”

Adding insult to injury, the court outrageously ordered the Liuzzo family to pay court costs of \$79,800, in addition to legal fees that amounted to more than \$60,000. This was appealed and eventually reduced to a smaller amount.

The unions helped to organize her funeral, at which the Rev. Martin Luther King was among the speakers. Beyond this, however, the official trade union leadership did virtually nothing to defend Liuzzo’s reputation and nothing to carry forward her example.

Both the middle class civil rights leadership and the unions remained tied to the big-business Democratic Party, whose Southern wing used violence and every other form of resistance to uphold Jim Crow. The unions had by this time become thoroughly integrated in the capitalist political set-up, and were among the most right-wing backers of imperialist foreign policy and the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The virtual abstention of the mass trade unions helped to keep black and white workers apart as the civil rights movement deepened. The leadership of the Southern fight was left predominantly in the hands of the African American clergy and the more conservative organizations of the middle class. This was to prove a fatal flaw of the civil rights struggle in the years immediately ahead.

The mass movement against Jim Crow increasingly revealed the underlying contradictions of capitalism that threw millions of workers on the unemployment lines and into poverty. This pointed to the need for a united movement of the working class for socialism as part of an international movement against capitalist exploitation, dictatorship and war.

Today, 50 years after Liuzzo’s death, the attacks on democratic rights, including police killings, the stirring up of racism and the attacks on voting rights, are more than ever the symptoms of a crisis-ridden profit system and pose the fundamental class issues above all. Viola Liuzzo represented the best elements of the working class, and a new generation must take forward her fight for social equality.



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