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USA :

The Murder of Trayvon Martin

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Popular anger, mass protests and leadership from Trayvon Martin's parents, the African-American community and its organizations have exposed the racial divisions that run throughout U.S. society.

Marches, rallies and the defiant wearing of hoodies are forcing the authorities to take actions that would not have occurred only months ago with the murder of a young African American male – and the demand for justice has become an international campaign.

History and reality are rolled into the response to the murder of Trayvon Martin – mobilizations for justice on one hand, and racist/rightist backlash on the other. Martin, like Emmett Till in the 1950s, has become the rallying cry for resistance to the far right's goal to put us – Blacks, women, gays, unionists – back in our place. [The case of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old from Chicago tortured and murdered in 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi, became a symbol for the Civil Rights struggle – ed.]

Every Black family knows full well that the lives of Black boys and men are valued less than their white counterparts. More white youths than Blacks wear hoodies, but cops and vigilantes rarely if ever see a white boy in a hoodie as suspicious or a threat. Racial profiling of Black boys and men is so taken for granted that many African Americans internalize and accept it.

What happened on February 26 in Sanford, a Florida town of 50,000, has galvanized Blacks and the larger public because it wasn't a cop who murdered an innocent boy "Walking While Black," but a self-proclaimed neighborhood vigilante – who told the cop, "it was self-defense" and walked away a free man. There was no yellow tape, no interview of possible witnesses and definitely no assumption that the shooter, George Zimmerman, could be telling a lie.

Rightwing Backlash

Many on the far right initially were caught off guard by the community response demanding justice. But when civil rights leaders and the first Black president showed empathy with the slain boy's parents, their tone quickly shifted.

The victim was now at fault for wearing a hoodie – and President Obama was an "instigator" of racial divisions. Radio talk shows and Fox "News" launched a smear campaign to turn the victim into the criminal. The Zimmerman family and friends took up the defense of the vigilante as the "victim" of Martin's aggression. His brother said if he didn't shoot Martin, George Zimmerman would be dead or a mental vegetable.

Responding to this blatantly racist campaign, Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon's mother, told a news conference, "They have killed my son. And now they are trying to kill his reputation." This came after the local media reports of Trayvon's suspension from school and other minor incidents, such as writing graffiti, having nothing to do with his murder.

The facts are clear. Trayvon Martin, age 17, was walking home from a local 7-Eleven store with a bag of candy and ice tea in his father's neighborhood in Sanford, a city in the Greater Orlando area. He had done so many times without incident. Trayvon was wearing his hood up to protect himself from the rain.

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A self-appointed neighborhood “watch captain,” George Zimmerman, 28, a light-skin Latino, decided Martin was suspicious looking. He called a 911 Dispatcher who told him to stand down until the police showed up. Zimmerman, with a concealed gun, instead got out of his SUV vehicle and stalked the innocent Black teenager. A confrontation occurred and Martin was shot dead.

When the cops arrived Zimmerman used a 2005 “Stand Your Ground” law that legalizes vigilantism if you declare a threat to your life. The police took his word that it was “self-defense” and he was allowed to go free. Zimmerman went home and for nearly two weeks lived his normal life. He expressed no remorse for his actions or issued any sympathy to Martin’s family.

For three days the corpse of Martin lay at the Medical Examiner morgue, supposedly tagged as a John Doe. Yet the cops reportedly had Trayvon’s ID, knew when Martin was born (1995) and had his cell phone. To the city and police, Martin was just another Black person in the morgue. African Americans in Sanford have always complained about inferior treatment and injustice at the hands of the cops.

Why did the police or medical examiner not contact Martin’s father or mother, who were frantically looking for their missing son? They turned to the public and asked: Why wasn’t Zimmerman charged? Why no homicide investigation?

Weeks of marches by civil rights groups, solidarity rallies in other cities, student walkouts and actions, hoodies worn by the Miami Heat basketball team and an intense national media spotlight (particularly by Black reporters) led to dribbles of information becoming known. This included the fact that the local prosecutor had wanted to file charges against Zimmerman for manslaughter. The state attorney general overruled him.

Mass pressure forced the appointment of a special prosecutor, who announced the arrest and second-degree murder indictment of Zimmerman on April 11.

License to Kill

Zimmerman and the police claimed Martin broke Zimmerman’s nose, pushed him to the ground and threatened to kill him. Martin, who weighed considerably less than Zimmerman, had no weapon.

As the news spread about the lack of justice, the Black community became outraged. The focus first centered on racial profiling — a common fear among Black men. Black parents already warn their sons growing up about cops being suspect of them. Now they must warn of legally armed vigilantes. (How many white mothers, sisters or daughters ever worry that their loved ones will be shot for “Walking While White”?)

The 2005 “Stand Your Ground” law says that “a person who is not engaged in an unlawful activity and who is attacked . . . has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force if he or she reasonably believes it is necessary to do so to prevent death or great bodily harm.”

Florida’s legislative body adopted the law by an overwhelming majority of Democratic and Republican legislators. Republican Governor Jeb Bush signed it. Similar laws have been adopted by 23 other states.

The law is based on English Common law — the “Castle” doctrine, which states that everyone has the right to use

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deadly force to protect yourself and family if threatened in your home. The “Stand Your Ground” goes much further by allowing that self-defense argument to be used in any situation, and anywhere.

The police opposed the “Stand Your Ground” law since it put them in an awkward position legally of having to accept the killer’s word after the victim is dead. Typically, as in the murder of Trayvon Martin, there is no serious investigation.

The results of the Florida law reveal its impact. According to the Tampa Bay Times, in the 130 cases it surveyed in which the law was invoked, 70% of the cases involved a fatality. A majority did not go to trial. The newspaper found the law used to justify shootings resulting from fights between neighbors. The state attorney noted that even “Gangsters are using this law. The law is being used to excuse violence.”

The lackluster investigation and failure to charge Zimmerman is par for the course. Most evidence was never processed at the scene of the killing. It is a clear travesty of justice. Of course, as every Black person knows, if Martin had been the stalker and shot Zimmerman, he would have been arrested and charged with murder.

What Zimmerman did was in line with his view that a person who is Black walking in “his” neighborhood is suspicious. Was race a factor? Clearly so, by his own comments that day. He sees a Black youth in a hoodie. Ignoring police orders, he initiates a confrontation.

Whether Martin fought back (his right of self-defense!) is irrelevant to the fact that at the end, the stalker murdered him.

The response of his parents, the Black community and national organizations like the NAACP and other civil rights leaders has changed the equation. There are Trayvon Martins murdered on a regular basis — many by cops, many by whites, or Latinos or other Black people. There is a culture of fear and suspicion toward Black men — more than toward any other ethnic group (including Arabs and Muslims).

Zimmerman’s action sparked so much outrage because of how it happened, and the shield provided by the 2005 law.

The politics of racism and hatred — institutionalized and deeply woven into U.S. culture and white-supremacist ideology — adds fuel to the debate. When President Obama said that if he had a son he would look like Trayvon, the far right went ballistic. But a fact is a fact.

NRA and ALEC

The underlying truth is that the far right has been on a determined drive to roll back social gains of Blacks, women and labor since the 1970s. Rightwingers never supported the New Deal, the social safety net or civil rights laws. Their view of “liberty and freedom” is the privileges of the wealthy, white skin and male domination.

It’s not a surprise that the response of the right to Trayvon Martin’s murder, once they got their racial bearings, was to blast the president, civil rights leaders and the liberal media for daring to talk about a local incident as a case of racial profiling and institutional racism.

The right does not want to discuss the big picture, because it exposes their organized agenda to roll back progress.

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The architecture of the “Stand Your Ground” law is an example of the broader game plan.

The conservative think tanks advocating the overturn of health care reform, a women’s right to contraceptives and abortion, Black civil rights and unions’ collective bargaining rights wrote the legislation for the state legislators. The Florida law spread to 23 states in a few years because of this coordinated effort.

Two prominent organizations have pushed these laws — the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). The NRA seeks to make concealed weapons’ permits available and applicable across state lines, and even in schools and workplaces.

ALEC is the reactionaries’ brain trust. It writes the laws so legislators don’t have to think at all. It is funded by major corporations (Exxon Mobil and UPS, for example) and billionaires like the Koch brothers.

ALEC also drafted the union-busting legislation against public workers in Wisconsin and other states. It works closely with rightwing groups that seek to reverse decades of precedents on basic rights.

There are no comparable groups on the liberal left playing the same role. Thus liberals have rolled over even on issues that they support such as gun control.

The Central Lesson: Organize

African Americans are hardest hit because their community depends heavily on the social safety net, unions and basic democratic rights. It took a Civil War for Blacks to be recognized as U.S. citizens and then another century to gain the right to vote and legal equality. African Americans have suffered as second class citizens for most of their history. They know that progress can be eroded if not reversed.

The significance of the movement to win justice for Trayvon Martin is not only to prosecute the vigilante killer George Zimmerman, but to shine the light of truth on cops and others who shoot Black men, attack women and bust unions across the country.

The central lesson for those under attack is to organize mass action to pressure the powers to be. We do not live in the mythical post-racial, color blind society depicted in conservative propaganda. Expecting federal or state government officials to “do the right thing” without that organized force will never succeed.

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