

Thousands pay tribute to seven-year-old murdered by Detroit police

Sharpton blames black youth for violence

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Several thousand people attended the viewing and funeral service for Aiyana Stanley-Jones, the seven-year-old girl killed by Detroit police during a May 16 raid on her east side Detroit home. The events—held on Friday and Saturday—were attended by hundreds of workers and young people from Detroit and outlying areas who were shocked and angered by the brutal murder of the second grader.

Aiyana was killed by a police SWAT team seeking to arrest a homicide suspect who lived in a separate, upstairs apartment at the home on Lillibridge. Even though they were warned there were several small children in the downstairs apartment, the police threw an incendiary device into the home and opened fire, striking the young girl in the head and neck while she was sleeping on a front room couch. In order to conceal their crime, they claimed the gun went off accidentally after a “scuffle” with the young girl’s grandmother.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Detroit Mayor David Bing defended the police and said it was “unfortunate” people were focusing on the young girl’s death instead of violent crime in the city. Bing’s spokeswoman reiterated this point the day after the funeral, saying, “People are upset with the police, and not upset with the criminals. That’s the problem.”

Hundreds attended the funeral to register their outrage at Aiyana’s murder. The Democratic Party officials and politically connected black clergymen who oversaw the event, however, had a different agenda. Their overriding concern was to dissipate popular opposition towards the police and shore up the credibility of city authorities.

While Mayor Bing was conspicuously missing, several Democratic Party officials, including long-time

congressman John Conyers and several city council members, were present. Democratic Party state legislators and other political figures also sent messages of sympathy to the grieving parents, Dominika Stanley and Charles Jones.

In their remarks, Reverend Horace Sheffield, attorney Geoffrey Fieger and Reverend Al Sharpton made a few verbal nods to the oppositional sentiment of the audience, but this was only to hammer home their reactionary message that workers and young people should stop blaming the police and politicians. Instead, the death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones was, like Mayor Bing claimed, part of the wave of violence in the city, which young black men were perpetuating.

This was most clearly articulated by Reverend Al Sharpton, the head of the National Action Network. While Sharpton has sought to cultivate an image of a “civil rights leader” through his association with high-profile brutality cases in New York and other cities, at the Detroit funeral he explicitly avoided any accusations of police brutality.

He dismissed claims by Republican gubernatorial candidate Michael Cox that he was trying to incite racial divisions by speaking at the funeral, saying, instead that he was disgusted that “we can’t see the police as partners” and that “it was us against them, instead of all of us against crime.” He said he was “angry and outraged,” but that it would be a “disservice to Aiyana just to vent” instead of working with city officials to put an end to so-called “black on black” crime.

“This is a wake-up call not only for those in authority,” he said, “but the community that has allowed this violence and recklessness to go too far.”

Sharpton then went on to rail against young black men who were “thugs, not protectors, hoodlums rather than parents.” The real problem, he said, was “some of you black men making babies you won’t raise,” adding, “I can’t believe what I see walking down the streets, young men calling women ugly names, wanting to be gangsters, not bankers.”

Sharpton continued, “I could cuss out the mayor, the police chief and argue with the attorney general, but I’m talking to you. All of us have done something to contribute to this.”

He rejected attempts to attribute high crime rates to the miserable social conditions in Detroit, where the real unemployment rate is 50 percent and much higher for black teenagers. “Times were harder than this,” he insisted, saying, “Even if you aren’t responsible for being down, you are responsible for getting up. When it gets rougher, you get tougher,” Sharpton insisted. Rather than blaming poverty and poor schools for crime and violence, he said, young black men had to “look in the mirror.” “Put that dope down, get the gun out of the house, quit calling women ‘hoes’ and quit destroying our neighborhoods.”

This insulting morality sermon is typical of the most privileged layers of blacks who have been integrated into the corporate and political establishment, while the vast majority of African-Americans in the inner cities suffer from the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression. (In a 2002 financial disclosure released as part of his bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2004, Sharpton reported an income of approximately \$400,000 from Pepsico and other business and consultant salaries. Some estimates put his present net worth at over \$5 million.)

In his contempt for the working class and defense of the profit system, Sharpton shares the views of President Obama and other black Democrats, such as Detroit Mayor David Bing, a millionaire black businessman. Thoroughly beholden to the most powerful corporate and financial interests, they are increasingly relying on the brute force of the police to deal with the inevitable social explosion that is being produced.

Bing, who is gutting public education and outlining a plan to shut down city services to whole neighborhoods deemed too poor to maintain, symbolizes the shift to the right of the whole black political establishment in

Detroit. In 1973, Coleman Young became the city’s first black mayor after running on a platform of opposition to police brutality. Today Bing categorically defends the police murder of a seven-year-old child in order to protect the wealth and privilege of the class he defends.

In contrast to the political officials, many of those in attendance at the funeral spoke sharply against the police, the shutdown of city services and mass unemployment in the city. (See accompanying video).

Robert Byrd, an artist, drove from Imlay City, Michigan, after staying up until 5:30 in the morning on the day of the funeral to complete a pastel portrait of Aiyana Stanley-Jones. He told the WSWs, “My wife and I were watching the news about the police shooting of this young girl. I was absolutely horrified and kept trying to think of what we could do to console this family. My wife then came up with the suggestion that I paint Aiyana’s beautiful little face and give it to the family.

“What was done is terrible and this is happening all over regardless of skin color. For a time, I was indifferent to conditions workers in Detroit faced and when I would see people wailing after a murder took place in the city, I didn’t really react to it. Then I received a phone call in 1997 that my own child was killed and nothing was done by the police to carry out a serious investigation. For all I know, they could have been involved in it.

“When I looked at her coffin today, it made me think about my own child. For time immemorial, the rich people running this society just don’t care. Her death did not have to happen. It’s all about the money. You have families starving, kids getting killed and people face big difficulties and it doesn’t really matter to them.” Commenting on the wave of utility shutoffs that have led to several deaths in the city, he said, “Shutting off people’s gas in the winter is a crime, just like the death of this little girl is a crime.”



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