

Violence in Chicago: A symptom of social breakdown

By Kristina Betinis
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Over the July 4th holiday weekend, a wave of violence and homicides in Chicago, Illinois claimed the lives of 16 people, and left another 82 wounded. The victims of the violence were overwhelmingly young—indeed all but two of those killed and wounded were between the ages of 14 and 35. The violence was centered in the poorest neighborhoods of the city on the south and west sides.

Chicago has suffered a years-long epidemic of youth violence. From 2008 to 2012, more than 1,100 of the city's 2,389 homicide victims were under the age of 25.

Among the dead this past weekend were two teenagers—14-year-old Pedro Rios, and 16-year-old Warren Robinson—who were shot and killed in two separate incidents by the Chicago Police Department. Police claimed to be acting in self-defense and said both boys refused to put down their weapons when ordered.

Robinson was killed while hiding under a car. “The police killed him,” said his mother, Georgina Utendahl. “Why they killed him, I don’t know.” Another three people shot by Chicago cops in the first week of July survived.

While the local and national media has reported on the violence, there has been no effort to examine the deeper causes of this human tragedy in America's third most populous city. On the contrary, the media has echoed the proclamations of political officials that the violence is “senseless” while calling for an even greater law-and-order crackdown on the city's youth.

In anticipation of a violent holiday weekend, city officials deployed hundreds of additional police and tactical teams, including uniformed SWAT teams, modified SUVs with lockers full of semi-automatic carbines, and police helicopters. Police Superintendent

Garry McCarthy stated that despite “hundreds of extra officers” the violence could not be stopped, calling the situation “a head scratcher.” He also advocated tougher gun laws and harsher sentencing for gun violations.

This was parroted by Mayor Rahm Emanuel who said the violence was “senseless” and “totally unacceptable” and called for better policing and more community accountability.

What Emanuel and the rest of the political establishment will not admit is that this epidemic is the consequence of a general breakdown of the society they oversee, and for which they are responsible. While Chicago boasts of 16 billionaires on Forbes' list of the world's richest people—those who have made a killing in real estate and financial speculation—the vast majority of working class youth are deprived of the most elemental necessities for a decent life.

Chicago was once a center of meatpacking, steel, trucking, railroad and other industries. Mass struggles of the working class, from the 1930s to the 1970s, led to a significant improvement in living standards. This made the city a pole of attraction for hundreds of thousands of immigrant, African American and other workers.

The Great Society and War on Poverty programs of the 1960s—implemented in the face of mass civil rights struggles and on the eve of the ghetto rebellions that spread through Chicago, Detroit and other cities—provided federal resources for early child care, education, food stamps, health care for the poor and elderly and low-income housing.

In the last 35 years, however, large swaths of Chicago, like Detroit and other cities, have been gutted by deindustrialization. Hundreds of thousands of manufacturing, transportation, health care and other relatively decent-paying jobs have been eliminated

since the late 1970s, with 22 percent of manufacturing jobs lost in the city in the early 2000s alone.

The latest Census data show that 14.5 percent of Chicago area residents live in official poverty, defined as a \$24,000 annual income for a family of four. The city has the third highest rate of extreme poverty (defined as less than half the official poverty rate) in the nation, behind Phoenix and Philadelphia. Another 21.5 percent of the city's population (573,258 people) is categorized as low income, earning between one and two times the federal poverty level.

These conditions are an indictment of the capitalist system and its representatives in the Democratic Party, which has controlled Chicago since 1931. The pro-business policies of Mayor Richard Daley and the current mayor, Rahm Emanuel, are the culmination of a protracted shift to the right by big city Democratic Party mayors, who embraced the "free market" in the 1980s and repudiated the liberal social reforms of the past.

President Clinton gutted federal welfare programs in the 1990s and oversaw the dismantling of public housing, which was presented as a magnet for drugs, crime and teenage pregnancy. In Chicago, tens of thousands of low-rent apartments were eliminated as high-rise housing projects were demolished.

Emanuel—Obama's former White House chief of staff—has escalated this policy of social counterrevolution, spearheading the assault on public education, including the shutdown of 50 schools last year, and attacking city workers and their pensions.

Emanuel has concentrated on providing corporate tax breaks and other incentives to make Chicago a center for financial speculation, Fortune 500 corporations, and upscale real estate development, which has increasingly pushed workers and young people out of the city.

All of this has been carried out with the participation of the trade unions, in what was once a major center of the American labor movement. The unions have collaborated with the employers and the government in a drastic redistribution of wealth to the top, while shutting down any manifestation of social protest.

For its part, the civil rights establishment, led by multi-millionaires like Chicago-based Jesse Jackson, has, in the name of "racial equality," focused on climbing into the ranks of the corporate and political elite. Any struggle to improve the condition of minority

workers was abandoned long ago. While the black elite has made it to the top—exemplified by President Obama himself—the conditions of African American workers and youth today are worse than at the launch of Johnson's War on Poverty a half-century ago.

Absent any organized and progressive mass struggle, the social catastrophe inflicted by the ruling class finds expression in all sorts of retrograde forms—including gang violence. As the response to the recent spurt of youth violence shows, the only answer forthcoming from the Emanuel administration will be more police repression.

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