

US media witch-hunts parents of boy nearly killed by gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo

By Eric London
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On Tuesday, the Cincinnati Police Department launched a criminal investigation of the parents of a three-year-old child who fell into a gorilla pen at the city's zoo on Saturday, forcing zoo officials to shoot and kill the 450-pound animal as it dragged the child across the ground.

Saturday's occurrence has attracted national media attention. CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and MSNBC have dedicated hours of television coverage and front-page web space to it in recent days, whipping up hysteria over the alleged "negligence" of the parents, Deonne Dickerson and Michelle Gregg. An online petition calling for the State of Ohio to remove parental custody of the couple's four children has received more than 400,000 signatures.

Based on what is known about what took place on Saturday the question must be raised: why has the media coverage of the event been largely devoid of empathy for the child's parents?

Michelle Gregg, a 32-year-old preschool administrator, took her four young children to the zoo on her day off from work. While tending to her three-year-old son, Gregg's daughter began to cry because she did not want to leave the zoo. She turned to tend to her daughter for a moment, and when she turned back around, saw her son in the pit which held three western lowland gorillas.

A YouTube video then captures Gregg's voice: "Mommy's right here, Mommy's right here," she cries to sooth her child as he is picked up and dragged by the gorilla known as Harambe. One witness described the mother as having a "breakdown." The mother and a male stranger were verbally restrained after they said they wanted to climb into the pit to save the child.

Zoo officials familiar with the behavior of lowland gorillas decided that tranquilizing the animal would only enrage it. The crowd of people shrieked and yelled, further frightening the animal. In what must have been a horrifying moment for Gregg and all those gathered, zoo officials fired at the gorilla and killed it.

Thankfully, the boy's family reports that the child is at home and is "doing just fine."

The response of sadness felt by hundreds of thousands over the loss of the gorilla is understandable. Western lowland gorillas are highly intelligent creatures and are listed as "critically endangered" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Gorillas face the threat of extinction in part because of unsustainable agricultural practices and poaching—both of which are driven by the deep poverty that dominates in the animal's habitat.

It is the opinion of most professionals that the dangerous and protective behavioral patterns of male western lowland gorillas made the shooting necessary to prevent the toddler's death. Zoos are dangerous places, and even trained professionals who follow strict protocols are sometimes killed by the animals they care for.

Jack Hanna, a professional zookeeper and television personality, said in a statement to the media: "I'll bet my life on this, that child would not be here today" if the zoo had not killed the gorilla. There is a definite distinction between the value of a gorilla's life and that of a child.

However, the corporate media has intervened to create a public fervor aimed at pinning the "blame" for what took place on the alleged "negligence" of the parents, who have been subjected to an onslaught of public denunciations and death threats.

Their most intimate details have been posted online, including their work addresses. Dickerson's past criminal convictions have been publicized to humiliate and slander him. Were that not enough, celebrities and news personalities have joined in the attacks. One exemplary misanthropic comment came from British comedian Ricky Gervais, who tweeted: "It seems that some gorillas make better parents than some people."

There is a noticeable difference in the way the corporate media responds to such accidents versus the crimes committed by the ruling class.

Just since Saturday's event, American police have killed 10 people and dozens of children, elderly, homeless, and mentally and physically handicapped people have been killed by the police in recent years. In November 2014,

police killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland, Ohio park a few hours north of Cincinnati.

This past Monday, an estimated 700 migrants drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to escape countries that have been reduced to rubble by the American military.

Yet if these tragedies are addressed at all, they are generally approached without the slightest criticism, as though they are blameless happenings for which nobody can or should be held accountable.

The manner in which the media has sought to witch-hunt Gregg and Dickerson exemplifies the skill with which the corporate press manipulates popular moods and even healthy aspirations in the most backward direction. Genuine sadness over the death of a beautiful animal has been transformed into a platform for the most confused sentiments directed against two working class parents.

The text of the petition “Justice for Harambe” expresses the social character of the attacks against them:

“We the undersigned want the parents to be held accountable for the lack of supervision and negligence that caused Harambe to lose his life. ... We believe that this negligence may be reflective of the child’s home situation. We the undersigned actively encourage an investigation of the child’s home environment in the interests of protecting the child and his siblings from further incidents of parental negligence. ...”

As a preliminary matter, there is no evidence to suggest that Gregg and Dickerson are abusive or criminally negligent parents. As Ohio State University criminal law Professor Ric Simmons told ABC News, “The mother was standing next to a zoo exhibit and lost track of her child for perhaps a minute or so. That has happened to almost every parent in the world in a public place.”

More importantly, the petition and the shaming of the parents point at the family’s “home situation” as the supposed cause of the incident. What is the “home situation” like for the Gregg-Dickerson family and for the vast majority of the American working class?

For Deonne Dickerson, Michelle Gregg and their children, and the millions just like them, life is a hard slog and a Saturday day-off a much-needed relief.

Gregg is employed at a preschool that cares for the children of workers, a job which in Cincinnati pays roughly \$20,310, according to earlychildhoodteacher.org. The parents of several of the children Gregg cares for told the press that she was not a negligent person. One mother told *People* magazine: “All the negativity I see online—that’s not her. She’s caring. It’s not about her not paying attention or not caring. Things happen.”

Dickerson is a 37-year-old worker employed as a poorly-paid sorter for an industrial parts corporation in

Cincinnati. He, like many workers in the US who grew up in poverty, has served jail time for burglary, firearm, and drug offenses and is trying to put his life in order for his wife and young children.

A high estimate for the combined income of the Dickerson-Gregg family is \$45,000, before tax, for six people—a “home situation” forced upon the family by a ruling class that has captured 95 percent of all income gain since the 2008 financial crash. Raising children on such a meager salary is nothing less than an impressive feat of parenthood, accomplished on a daily basis by hundreds of millions of working class parents only through years of self-sacrifice, overwork, and physical and mental exhaustion.

By presenting these events as entirely removed from their social and economic context, the defenders of the capitalist status quo portray the tragedies and everyday problems faced by billions of workers around the world as personal problems for which the individual is entirely to blame.

But there is an emerging understanding, expressed through the resurgence of strikes and the millions of votes for Democrat Bernie Sanders, a self-described socialist presidential candidate, that the problems faced by the great mass of working people are not personal but social problems. In this context, the ruling class fears the political consequences of empathy and understanding and responds by exploiting confusion to generate misanthropy.

Despite the efforts of the media the majority of the population has responded to the events in Cincinnati with compassion and understanding. In less than one day, nearly a million people shared a letter posted on Facebook by a zoologist sorrowfully defending the decision to protect the young boy’s life. Even this most basic expression of social solidarity poses a threat to the maintenance of an economic order based on poverty, inequality, and war.

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