

Chauvin's Conviction and the Future of Policing

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In a decision that led to celebration in Minneapolis and throughout America, a jury of twelve black and white men and women on April 20 convicted white police officer Derek Chauvin of two counts of murder in the case of George Floyd, a black man. Seldom are police officers charged and tried and it is extremely rare that they are found guilty of murder. Three other officers who have been charged with aiding in Floyd's murder will also be tried soon.

Three things brought about Chauvin's conviction. First, Darnella Frazier, a courageous girl of 17, used her cellphone to videotape Chauvin's murder of George Floyd. The video showed Chauvin with his knee on Floyd's neck for nine minutes as Floyd repeatedly said, "I can't breathe." Her video became the key evidence in the trial, the prosecution telling jurors, "Believe your eyes."

Second, the Chauvin's murder of Floyd on May 25, 2020 set off national protests that grew throughout the spring and summer of 2020 with at least 15 million Americans demonstrating and marching from coast to coast. The Black Lives Matter protests led to demands for police reform and change public attitudes.

Third, the mixed-race jury broke with the usual practice of police impunity and brought a conviction of murder. Chauvin has not yet been sentenced, but he could go to prison for over forty years.

President Joseph Biden commented on the verdict: "It was a murder in the full light of day, and it ripped the blinders off for the whole world to see the systemic racism...that is a stain our nation's soul; the knee on the neck of justice for Black Americans; the profound fear and trauma, the pain, the exhaustion that Black and brown Americans experience every single day."

Yet even as Chauvin was being tried, in a Minneapolis suburb a white woman police officer shot and killed Duante Wright during a stop for an expired car registration. The officer claimed that she

mistook her gun for her Taser. Black people are two and a half times more likely to be killed by the police than are white people. Already in 2021 police have shot and killed 241 Black people nationally, compared to 235 in 2020. Most of those killed are black men, though some are women and others are children.

While Black Americans and progressives celebrated Chauvin's conviction, and some see it as a possible turning point, others are skeptical. In the United States, states and cities generally control policing and there are 49 state police agencies and 17,985 local police departments. Democrats drafted the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act that would give greater power to the U.S. Justice Department to investigate police misconduct issues, create independent state agencies to investigate excessive use of force, establish a federal registry of complaints, reduce the qualified immunity that police enjoy, require body cameras, end chokeholds, and abolish "no-knock" warrants. Republicans, who have a reputation as the party of law and order and generally support the police, will oppose the bill, saying they want more moderate changes.

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, Black people and progressives called for "defunding the police," meaning the transfer of funds for policing to other areas such as mental health programs. The far left, including the Democratic Socialists of America, advocate abolishing the police. But only a handful of cities reduced their police budgets and no city has abolished the police. A majority of Black voters oppose drastic budget cuts or abolition of the police, since many live in high crime neighborhoods. Nor do progressives support abolition of the police.

The Chauvin conviction was momentous, and could be a turning point, but police reform ultimately depends on building a popular movement for reform in education, health, housing, as well as ending police racism and violence. We need to end inequality in wealth and power, and ultimately we must abolish capitalism.