

Cincinnati: First Outsider, First African American Police Chief

August 12, 2011

A Victory After Decades of Struggle for Racial Justice

Cincinnati's recent selection of someone who is not white and is not from the West Side of Cincinnati as the city's new police chief is a victory for justice and civil rights, and a vindication of the efforts of those activists who for decades have struggled against the racism, violence and abuse that have characterized the Cincinnati Police Department.

The Cincinnati Police Department's long history of malfeasance reached a crisis on April 7, 2001 when a police officer pursued a young unarmed African American man named Timothy Thomas, wanted for nothing worse than traffic violations, and shot and killed him in a downtown alley. Thomas was the fifteenth African American man under 50 to have been killed by the police between 1995 and 2001, some of those black men had been unarmed and some were killed in police custody. The African American community, finally having reached the breaking point, erupted in four days of unrest, an uprising against racism and police violence by the African American inner-city community. The unrest was followed in June by a March for Justice of 2,500 Cincinnatians, both black and white.

Shortly before Thomas was killed, the Black United Front and the American Civil Liberties Union had brought a federal lawsuit against the Cincinnati Police. During the same period, the U.S. Justice Department had begun to look into the CPD policies and practices. In 2002 under the watchful eyes of Judge Susan Dlott and despite the resistance of the Mayor Charlie Luken, Chief of Police Tom Streicher, and the FOP, all of the parties — the Front, the ACLU, the CPD, and the Justice Department — reached a Collaborative Agreement intended to end police misconduct. The Collaborative Agreement restrained the CPD's racist and violent behavior and ended the string of police killings of black men.

Meanwhile, in response to the killing of Thomas, a group of African American ministers led by Rev. J.W. Jones and white allies from the March for Justice organizing committee formed the Coalition for a Just Cincinnati (CJC) and initiated a boycott of Cincinnati to protest both criminal justice and economic policies. The CJC demanded an end to social and economic apartheid, support for and enforcement of civil and human rights, the restoration of public accountability of the police force, and reform of government and election procedures. The CJC boycott demands constituted a call for bringing democracy and social justice to Cincinnati.

When those demands were announced, Cincinnati was already being boycotted by the gay and lesbian community. The LGBT boycott of the city had come in response to a 1993 amendment to the city's Charter forbidding the City Council from enforcing equal protection in employment, housing, and public accommodations on the basis of sexual orientation. The Black United Front and other organizations also initiated their own boycotts of the city as the pressure mounted. The various boycotts by the LGBT community and by the African American community proved to be powerful economic levers that in the search for justice turned away many conventions and entertainers and eventually cost the city millions of dollars.[1]

In another important development, in 2001 Cincinnati voters passed an amendment to the city charter permitting the selection of a police chief from outside of the department, a development fought by the Fraternal Order of Police all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court where the amendment was upheld. If today we have a new black police chief, it is less because of the good will of Mayor Mark Mallory and City Manager Milton R. Doheny, Jr., and more the result of a decade of struggle by African American Cincinnati residents and their white allies.

The hiring of Police Chief James Craig represents a victory for the African American community and breaks with the city's bankrupt political traditions. Since 1912, every police chief in Cincinnati's history had come from the conservative, German Catholic neighborhoods of the West Side, the last several from either Catholic Elder High School or public Western Hills High School. The continuous selection of police chiefs from the conservative white neighborhoods of the West Side tended to perpetuate a good old boys mentality within the police department that militated against the acceptance and promotion of African American, Latino or female officers for years after the civil rights movement. The domination of a white West Side clique within the force made it virtually impossible for the department's leaders to understand the issues facing the African American community.

Chief Craig, selected from among 40 candidates to head the Cincinnati Police Department, previously headed the Police Department of Portland Maine, a city of only 60,000 compared to Cincinnati's nearly 300,000. There he headed up a force of only 215 officers, while here he will be the chief of 1,057. Craig worked in the 1970s in the Detroit Police Department, in the 1980s in the Los Angeles Police Department and then Portland, Maine. As an officer and area commander he has worked in all sorts of police work, often in community relations, and has won praise and won awards for his achievements. Certainly, most in Cincinnati will be wishing him well and hoping that the Cincinnati Police Department's long history of racism, violence and abuse is coming to an end.

Yet if we no longer have a police chief who comes from Western Hills, citizens still need to be vigilant in overseeing policing operations and the police culture. The police are about law and order. The police exist to enforce the laws and the laws exist to protect the existing order, and the that order remains one of capitalist exploitation of working people, of an increasing and shocking gap between rich and poor, of racist economic segregation of the community, and of patriarchy and homophobia. Cincinnati remains dominated by the same handful of powerful corporations — Proctor and Gamble, Macy's, Western & Southern, American Financial Group, Chiquita, Kroger, E.W. Scripps, Fifth Third Bank — that determined the city's economic and political destiny for the last century or so. The Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC), a not-for-profit created to enhance the profit of banks, realtors, developers and builders, continues to determine the future of the inner-city, aiming to replace poor African Americans with a cosmopolitan creative class all under the banner of economic mix. Everywhere the deeply entrenched patterns of racial segregation and class separation remain. And if the police enforce the laws to protect the existing order, then that is what they are protecting.[2]

We do not look to the City of Cincinnati, the Mayor, the City Manager or the new Chief of Police to deliver us. We don't have faith that the Republicans or the Democrats can bring us social justice. Only working people organizing themselves and fighting from below against the system of "law and order" that typically protects the wealth, exploits workers, and deprives and humiliates the poor can change our city and our larger society. Ten years ago movements from below placed demands on the table that could not be ignored and led to the collaborative agreement and then to the new police chief that Cincinnati has today. Frederick Douglass's famous statement — "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will." — must remain our slogan. We need to continue building the movements from below of working people and the unemployed, African American, Latino, Asian, Native American, and white, both native born and immigrant, to fight to create a city

that will be good for all of us, for our grandparents and parents, for our children and grandchildren.

Notes

1. For a more detailed account of these events see, Dan La Botz, "A Decade since the Rebellion of 2001. What Have We Learned," published as a three part series in The Cincinnati Beacon. Part 1 is available here.

2. For a more detailed picture of Cincinnati's power structure see, Dan La Botz, "Who Rules Cincinnati?" It is also available on Kindle and through Barnes & Noble electronic downloads.

Dan La Botz is a Cincinnati-based teacher, writer, and activist.