Zimmerman Verdict: Still Impunity in the U.S. for the Killing of Black Men and Boys

written by Dan La Botz | July 14, 2013

The acquittal of George Zimmerman on charges of manslaughter and murder in the Trayvon Martin case on July 13 represents another incident in the long history of impunity for those who in the name of the law and order kill African American men and boys. Zimmerman, an armed, neighborhood watch leader in Sanford, Florida, followed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old and legally a child, through his neighborhood—despite the fact that after calling the police Zimmerman had been informed that they did not want him to follow the individual that he had identified as "a real suspicious guy." When Zimmerman overtook Martin, there was an altercation that left the armed vigilante alive and the black teenager dead. Zimmerman's attorneys argued that he should be acquitted of the charges of manslaughter and murder because he had acted in self-defense after being attacked by Martin.

The long and complicated trial before a jury of six women, one a woman of color, presented conflicting testimony about who was on top once the two were fighting on the ground and who it was that called for help, the mother of the killer and the mother of the victim both identifying their son's voice as that calling for help. The jury decided that it had not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Zimmerman had not acted in self-defense. Yet, while the specifics of this case may be complex and the decision of the jury consonant with Florida law, the injustice of that decision is all too apparent to African Americans and their allies who know that it is only another example of impunity for those who either as real police officers or would-be police officers kill black men and boys. Let us put the facts simply: an armed vigilante with no legal or police authority followed a black child through the neighborhood and killed him. Yet the killer walks free. Whites in the South and in other regions of the country were free to kill African Americans with little likelihood of punishment under slavery, during the Jim Crow era, and apparently can still do so in what some have called the "post-racial" age. At best one can say the justice system unfortunately failed, though many, especially black Americans will feel that it worked, as it has worked for decades.

Demonstrations protesting the Trayvon Martin decision began on the West Coast, in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, the same night as the jury reached its decision. There have also been demonstrations in Washington, D.C. and Tallahassee. Other demonstrations are planned for Sunday, July 14 in cities throughout the country. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is calling upon the U.S. Justice Department to act in the case. They are circulating this:

> "We're calling on the U.S. Justice Department to open a civil rights case against George Zimmerman and have launched a petition to Attorney General Eric Holder. The petition says:
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> "The Department of Justice has closely monitored the State of Florida's prosecution of the case against George Zimmerman in the Trayvon Martin murder since it began. Today, with the acquittal of George Zimmerman, it is time for the Department of Justice to act.
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> "The most fundamental of civil rights—the right to life—was violated the night George Zimmerman stalked and then took the life of Trayvon Martin. We ask that the Department of Justice file civil rights charges against Mr. Zimmerman for this egregious violation.

"Please address the travesties of the tragic death of Trayvon Martin by acting today. Thank you."

Click here to add your name to this petition, and then pass it along to your friends.

The struggle for racial justice in the United States continues, now over the killing of Trayvon Martin, where the killer walks free. Perhaps this most notorious of recent cases will provide the occasion for the reconstruction of an African American civil rights movement that can demand not only justice from the courts, but economic and social justice from the society at large.