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Death Squad America

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As we write the U.S. election is still impending, and so we cannot know which candidates won. What we do know is that once again workers have lost.

We faced a grim choice between a president who cheers on police and neofascist thugs as they shoot down protesters and a former vice president who suggests it would be better to merely maim us; a president who encourages his followers to ram their cars into anti-fascist protesters and his opponent's suggestion that instead "anarchists and arsonists" be arrested and prosecuted for our thought crimes; a president who loots the treasury for his personal benefit and a man who spent his entire career shilling for the banks and insurance firms, helping them pick our pockets and shielding them from being held culpable for their crimes.

These are dark times indeed. Paramilitary thugs roam the country, brandishing assault rifles and shouting anti-Semitic slogans. In Portland and other cities, they coordinate with local police as they threaten demonstrators against police brutality and institutional racism, and actually fire paintballs and other ostensibly nonlethal weapons. One of these neofascists killed two protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, August 25, and wounded a third. Police allowed him to

go home without so much as questioning him, though he was later arrested on murder charges. Trump and his cheerleaders at Faux News heralded the killer as a hero.

Police have long shot down people with impunity – more than a thousand a year, year after year; a killing spree that has not been slowed by a spate of ‘reforms’ including body cameras, new use of force policies, training in non-lethal methods, etc. But these have not typically been politically motivated; rather, the police have killed those they thought might be committing a crime (often something as trivial as jaywalking) or not showing them the deference to which they feel entitled. For decades U.S. police have stationed snipers atop buildings overlooking demonstrations, but they did not open fire on the crowds. (Spying, infiltrating and harassment were, of course, different matters.) That “restrained” approach has eroded during the ongoing protests against police brutality, with police and federal forces (a motley crew of National Guard, Marshals, Secret Service, Park Police, Capitol Police, Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms officers, Customs and Border Protection agents, and Immigration Enforcement – many not in uniform or otherwise identified) firing rubber bullets and tear gas directly into crowds doing nothing more than exercising the right supposedly guaranteed by the First Amendment to protest government abuses. In some cases they have fired live ammunition at protestors, but it did not appear that these were targeted assassination attempts.

(Overseas, of course, is another matter. The Obama administration ordered the assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen; his 16-year-old son was killed two weeks later while hanging out with friends, and the Trump administration killed his 8-year-old daughter in another drone strike. All three were U.S. citizens.)

Earlier this year, there were dozens of reports of unmarked vans filled with black-clad men abducting activists. Most were released hours later, after being held and interrogated by federal agents (though at least one abduction was carried out by New York City police, who issued the victim a citation before releasing her).

But now we see U.S. marshals acting as a death squad, murdering anti-fascist activist Michael Reinhoehl in cold blood. On Sept. 3, plain-clothes marshals (most actually local law enforcement who had been deputized) blocked his car in two unmarked vehicles, jumped out, and let loose a hail of bullets. An hour before Reinhoehl was killed, the president tweeted a call for police to “Do your job, and do it fast.” Trump then described Reinhoehl’s killing as “retribution,” and in his first debate with Joe Biden said, “I sent in the U.S. Marshals, they took care of business.” The Marshals Service denied this, issuing a statement claiming that they had attempted to “peacefully arrest” Reinhoehl for shooting a neofascist he said was threatening protestors’ lives.

However, the *New York Times* reported Oct. 13 that the death squad did not have an arrest warrant and witnesses said they did not identify themselves as police or give any commands before opening fire. Parents hustled children playing nearby to safety as Reinhoehl fled the hail of bullets on foot. The assassins fired at least 29 rounds from four guns, several hitting a nearby house and one narrowly missing a man sitting in his dining room. Police claim Reinhoehl was drawing a gun as they opened fire. However, the gun was still in his pocket when they examined his corpse. Despite the ubiquity of police body cameras, no one on the death squad was wearing one – we have only their contradictory reports, statements of several witnesses, a cell phone video that catches the final seconds of the murder, and the scattered bullets to go on.

ProPublica reports that Reinhoehl fled Portland after several trucks drove past the rental home he lived in with his son and middle school-age daughter, firing three rounds into the house. Reinhoehl got his daughter out of the house, left her with friends, and fled to Lacey, Washington (near Olympia).

However, police had the apartment where a friend put him up under surveillance, and U.S. marshals dispatched a team to kill Reinhoehl just a few hours after Portland authorities charged him with second degree murder. He had just left the apartment and gotten

in his station wagon when the marshals opened fire. One witness said the killers seemed to be drug dealers; another thought they were a right-wing militia. The killers refused a neighbor's offer of medical assistance, telling the veteran to "shut the fuck up."

Death squads kidnapping and murdering dissidents are nothing new. The U.S. has long sponsored death squad regimes around the world, and shares responsibility for their many victims. In the 1850s, the state of California organized units to hunt down and kill Native Americans, paying out \$1.5 million, much of it reimbursed by the federal government. For decades, union activists routinely faced gun thugs hired by the employers. The FBI worked with armed gangs and police, waging a war of terror against the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party, killing dozens of AIM supporters on the Pine Ridge reservation and famously murdering Fred Hampton (among many Panthers killed) in his bed.

The death squad resurgence is a sign of fear, not strength. The Trumpsters and the police know they are deeply unpopular, and believe they can hold onto power only through intimidation. But they are dangerous nonetheless. Solidarity between all the progressive forces is essential, as is renewed organizing. An organized working class can shut down the apparatus of repression by refusing to supply it, or through general strikes and other direct action that makes it clear we will never submit.

We can not look to the government to defend us; rather we must build the organized solidarity that enables us to act for ourselves, and to shut the death squads down once and for all. [JB]