

— New York City Subway Killing —

Neely No Angel, Penny No Hero

Last month, Jordan Neely, a homeless, schizophrenic black man with a criminal history of violent attacks, threatened passengers on a subway train and was choked to death for 15 minutes by a white man, Daniel Penny. Crime and crazed outbursts are concerns that working people who ride the subway face every day. Transit workers are terrorized daily on the job; riders are pushed on the tracks, mugged and killed. It is a basic right of working people to not be terrorized and to defend themselves. When it comes to the details—we are not indifferent to Neely’s killing. The 15-minute chokehold was excessive, and Neely did *not* deserve to die. But when confronted with the threat of physical harm, Penny had the right to defend himself and others against Neely.

When the case first hit the news, many working people—black, white and Latino—were sympathetic to Penny. Responses like “Someone finally stepped up to protect riders” and “If someone steps to me, I’m taking them down, too” expressed the brutal reality of what would have to be done if faced with the same situation. The multiracial proletariat, traveling to poverty-wage jobs with bosses who serve them on a silver platter to injury and death and back to rat-, roach- and mold-infested project buildings and ghetto housing, has to take New York City mass transit,

where all the ills of capitalist society are thrown on their heads inside a crowded metal box.

While many workers understood that Neely’s killing was nothing like the murders of Trayvon Martin or Ahmaud Arbery, they fear that this incident will be used by racist white vigilantes as an excuse to come out of their holes. This justified fear was further stoked by the anti-racist liberals when they declared Neely’s killing to be a racist attack. For days, the media bombarded the proletariat with constant footage and images of the incident. But one thing was different. To further push the narrative that Neely was the victim of a race-fueled crime, and not threatening a crazed assault on passengers, the two men who helped Penny restrain Neely were cropped out; one of them was either black or Latino.

This propaganda barrage only reinforced the liberal narrative that Penny, who now faces second-degree manslaughter charges, was a racist intending to kill Neely for the color of his skin, shifting the consciousness of some of the working masses to this perspective. The existing black leadership has had a hand in this as well. Reverend Al Sharpton struck the same theme when he spoke at Neely’s funeral service: “Jordan was screaming for help,” “We keep criminalizing people with mental illness” and

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“A good Samaritan helps those in trouble.” Sharpton and other black Democrats have placed themselves in the forefront of lining up the black population behind the anti-racist liberal program, amplifying the racial divisions in American society.

Liberals argue that Neely should have been “met with compassion” and deny that black lumpen crime is even a problem. According to them, any talk of threats from mentally unhinged black people who are having a meltdown is racist and shows indifference. This liberal garbage blames Neely’s death on working people forced to use the subway day in and day out. An example is the op-ed titled “Making People Uncomfortable Can Now Get You Killed” (*New York Times*, 4 May) by rad-lib Rutgers professor Roxane Gay, who declares: “The people in that subway car prioritized their own discomfort and anxiety over Mr. Neely’s distress. All of the people in that subway car on Monday will have to live with their apparent inaction and indifference.”

This moralistic blackmail completely alibis the capitalist ruling class that is responsible for the surge in the mentally ill homeless population and the overall rot of this society, conditions that will produce many more Neely-and-Penny situations. The only way to stop the decay of the urban centers and the rest of the country, and provide a solution to the mental illness crisis, is by overthrowing the capitalist system. This requires a communist leadership that will stop at nothing to expose how the liberals seek to subordinate the proletariat to the capitalist ruling class and how their program fuels the racial divide.

Many liberals and their tails like Left Voice claim that the Neely case has nothing to do with self-defense. Rather, as Left Voice puts it, he “was executed for being poor, Black, and disabled,” painting Penny as a racist and any physical confrontation involving a white man defending himself against a black man as automatically driven by racism. These fake socialists write that “Jordan Neely brought joy to subway riders by impersonating Michael Jackson” and on that fatal day was just “hungry, thirsty,

and tired” and was killed for it. But that is just another invention to further divide the working class along racial lines. Neely was unhinged, acted in a threatening manner and was said to have thrown trash at passengers.

Juan Alberto Vazquez caught Neely’s death on his phone and reported that Neely had shouted: “I’m tired already. I don’t care if I go to jail and get locked up. I’m ready to die.” This wasn’t a man who was moonwalking on the train and placed in a chokehold out of nowhere by a white racist looking for his next black victim. In the eyes of the passengers that day, Neely was a real-life threat. What would the liberals and fake leftists have them do? Wait until Neely had physically harmed or killed someone—wait until it was too late? That’s exactly what they want: for the proletariat to sacrifice itself in the name of liberal compassion!

Left Voice proposes more mental health workers on the trains to deal with the homeless and mentally ill, instructing the unions to “join the call in New York City for care, not Cops” and “for increased mental health services... rather than bloated police budgets.” NYC certainly needs more social services, but the main obstacle to that is the liberal politics pushed by Left Voice, which physically and politically disarm the working class, obstruct united class struggle across racial lines and tie workers and black people to their oppressors. Achieving any gains in housing, health care, etc., will require the mobilization of force by the proletariat against the class enemy, not compassionate pacifism that begs the capitalists to treat more kindly the very victims they create. The prerequisite for the working class to struggle and win its most basic needs is breaking with the anti-racist liberal program pushed by the fake left, which serves as an obstacle to advancing its interests.

The disaster for working people that results from the left’s embrace of liberalism was on vivid display during the pandemic. In an act of utter class treason, Left Voice and the overwhelming majority of the left supported the lockdowns, which exacerbated the recent explosion in homelessness and mental health issues, disproportionately devastated black people and unleashed anti-union attacks. By looking to the capitalist state as the arbiter of public health, these labor traitors politically disarmed and divided the working class, blocking the necessary struggle that is and was necessary to protect workers’ lives and livelihoods against the apparatus of class oppression.

The liberals deny reality. The conditions of black people in Biden’s America are increasingly desperate. With Biden’s only selling point being that he was the vice president to the first black president, it is blatantly obvious that his administration will make no attempt to improve the situation of the black masses. Forcibly kept at the bottom of American society and making up the “last hired, first fired” reserve army of labor, black people have simply been written off by the capitalist rulers who have no jobs for them. This has been greatly intensified by the pandemic lockdowns and their aftermath, especially in New York City. The hotel programs, which provided housing to mainly black homeless men, came to a crash-

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ing halt when the city no longer wanted to pay, and thousands were evicted. Mass layoffs and the end of the rent moratoriums added up to a perfect storm for a homeless population explosion.

The increased desperation of those living on the street without the basic necessities of life has led to a spike in schizophrenic psychoses and paranoia among the majority black homeless. The capitalist system literally drives people to insanity and crime. But anybody who looks at reality squarely and states this truth will quickly be branded a racist by the liberals.

It is to be expected that the economic and health crisis generated by the lockdowns, along with worsening social conditions, will produce depraved human beings, as the "Empire City" slides into the barbarism of decaying American capitalism. It is intolerable that such "human garbage," as Marx described the criminal elements of the lumpenproletariat, can terrorize the public at will. This is why the *only* solution to spiraling crime rates and to the increase of the mentally ill and homeless populations is not greater compassion but the abolition of the capitalist system that breeds poverty, crime and insanity. In the meantime, it is not just an elementary reflex but of crucial importance to the working class, not least its black component, to be able to defend itself in the midst of social decay.

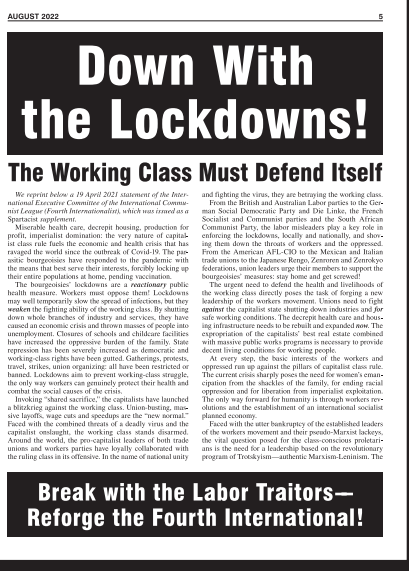
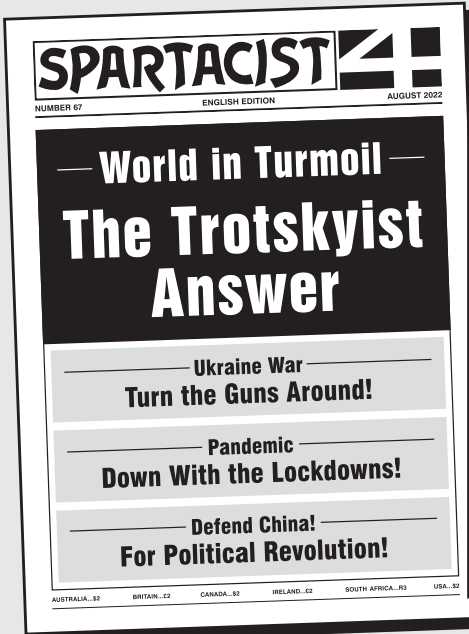
To the liberals, working class self-defense is racist and uncompassionate. So, instead, the liberals call for more cops on the streets and subways. In the face of crime, some workers ask themselves: "Where are the police?" The cops are never there when you need them, they are too busy pummeling or shooting fare beaters and graffiti artists and

rousting homeless people for being homeless. The black and Latino working masses know that more cops on the subways can only spell disaster by giving the thugs in blue more opportunity to catch minority youth and workers in their crosshairs. The liberal response of "no" to self-defense and "just trust the cops to do their job" is suicide for the working class.

Liberal illusions in the police and the decaying conditions of society have led some workers to turn to politicians like Democratic NYC mayor Eric Adams, a former transit cop who ran on a "law and order" platform, as a savior with an answer to crime and the immiseration of both the working class and the mentally ill. Reliance on capitalist politicians is deadly and a dead end, because the bourgeoisie's response to crime is to strengthen its own repressive apparatus, while disarming the population through measures like gun control and smashing strikes and picket lines. The main purpose of the capitalist state apparatus—the cops, courts and prisons—is not to protect the population but to maintain the oppressive status quo, which breeds violent crime.

This is the same status quo the anti-racist liberals want to maintain by tinkering with the worst excesses of capitalism and the capitalist state. The cops' badge and gun are a license to terrorize the ghettos, harassing, shaking down and murdering black people. "Mental health" and "de-escalation" training do not change this fact. Disarming black people and Latinos means they will be killed in greater numbers by vigilantes, criminals and police. Marxists must struggle against the monopolization of the means of violence in the hands of the capitalist state, while

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upholding the right of working people to defend themselves, as Malcolm X said, "by any means necessary."

The hard fact is that oppression oppresses. Marauding by the mentally ill on the NYC subways is a mass phenomenon and has become a major concern for New Yorkers. Is it racist to say that? The liberals think so. By their lights, to mention crime by mentally ill black people or to acknowledge that the working class has fears of being victimized is to fuel racist reaction. But denying this concern is what will push the white masses into the arms of the racists. It is profoundly dangerous and demoralizing to keep the population, black as well as white, in a constant state of helpless fear. Such desperation among white people spawns fascist mobilizations and racist vigilantes.

The right wing has also inflamed the racial polarization, hailing Penny as a "hero" and calling for more "law and order." This response can only inspire ultraright and fascist elements to terrorize the poor black masses in the name of fighting crime. The fear among workers that the Neely case will be a rallying point for these unsavory sections of society is warranted. While upholding the right of individuals to defend themselves, we strenuously oppose any kind of vigilantism, which could only become a racist pogrom. We do not call on the working masses to implement the bosses' racist "law and order."

But there is something here that the liberals refuse to face. Crime by the destitute is no joke, and its usual targets are the urban proletariat and ghetto residents. Not addressing the issue can only foment reaction in the class. The bourgeoisie's pandemic response, as well as the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations, intensified all these ills of society. In racist capitalist America, the lumpenproletariat and the mentally deranged overlap to a large degree with the oppressed minority population. Crime and vigilantism are explosive issues because they intersect the black question, the key to the American socialist revolution. What's the answer? Jobs, education, housing, health care—all the things that decaying capitalism cannot provide because it's in repeated economic and social crisis.

The only way to even begin to address crime, meet the needs of workers and the poor and bridge the racial divide is to break with the left's anti-racist liberal program, which subordinates the proletariat, both black and white, to the capitalist rulers, leaving it open to attack. It is the task of communists to wage war against this liberal hysteria and to put forward a Marxist solution to end this brutally racist capitalist system, which creates hellish poverty and associated crime, mental illness and black lumpenism and pits the black masses against their white class brothers and sisters. ■

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