

People's Justice

Fifth Estate Collective

1970

...In the Streets of Highland Park

The cold-blooded murder of a young black man on July 11 touched off several days of street violence in Highland Park.

Jerry Lawlah, 24-year-old former athlete at Highland Park High, was shot to death by the white bartender and part owner of the Kozy Korner Bar.

Before he shot Lawlah, the bartender screamed, "I should kill all you niggers."

Black Highland Parkers responded to the killing by burning down the bar the next evening after picketing in front of it during the day. Highland Park pigs moved in and the scene was set for the next four days. Bands of young people roved Hamilton at night, doing minor burning and looting, defying an 8:00 p.m. curfew. There were 141 persons arrested by the combined city, state and county police departments. Several persons were shot.

The events leading up to the shooting were described by witnesses who said Lawlah entered the bar at Hamilton and Avon at about 1 a.m. with three companions. One of the trio suggested a game of pool.

Lawlah asked a middle-aged white barmaid, Katherine Mix, to change a \$1 bill to operate the quarter-a-game pool table. She refused, telling him he could obtain change only by buying something.

Lawlah, described by friends as a pleasant, friendly man, agreed and ordered a beer. The barmaid then demanded that he also pay for a round of drinks ordered by his companions.

When he tried to explain that he had not ordered the drinks and never did want anything but change anyway, the barmaid began to argue violently.

Rather than argue with her, Lawlah began to leave. Just as he got to the door, he was menaced by the bartender, Grady Cash, who had taken a revolver from behind the bar.

The pair exchanged words and Cash fired several shots, point blank at his victim. Lawlah staggered, mortally wounded, out the front door and collapsed some 20 feet from the entrance.

Although the police and papers reported that Lawlah was killed immediately, his friends say he was still alive when the police arrived 45 minutes after being called. Highland Park Hospital is just around the corner from the bar but the pigs took time out to draw a chalk circle around Lawlah's bleeding body. He was dead on arrival when the pigs finally took the body to the hospital.

Cash was freed on \$20,000 bond several hours after his arrest.

One has to understand the background of Highland Park before realizing that justice in the streets was the only way left to its black population. The city, which is surrounded on all sides by Detroit, has a population of 38,000 that is half black.

All of the city's institutions are racist and corrupt. It has all the characteristics of a small Southern town and the fact that a Negro, Robert Blackwell, is mayor does nothing to alter this.

The police force is scandal-ridden as are the schools and the hospital administration. Blacks have been moving politically to alter the situation, but have met nothing but resistance from the entrenched white racists. The strike at the Junior College last fall is an example.

Things are changing in Highland Park. More white people are now leaving the city and blacks have become aware that a city run by them is the solution to the city's problems.

...And in the plant

More deaths at the Chrysler Eldon Avenue plant. This time not an accident, but an act of rage.

James Johnson, Jr., a black worker, was suspended by his foreman for insubordination after he had complained about being replaced by a man with less seniority. The foreman, Hugh Jones, ordered Johnson to leave the plant.

Johnson had been at the plant for three years and had a perfect work record. "His job was his whole life," said a neighbor of his.

He returned to the plant in an hour with an M-1 carbine in his hand and shouted for the other workers to get back. He said he was after Jones and the general foreman of department 78, James Rhodes.

The workers stood back, stopping production because sometime in the past most had felt the same way about management. He found Jones, also black, and killed him with several shots. At this point many workers panicked and began fleeing wildly to get out of the way of the spraying bullets. Several were injured from running into machinery.

Still looking for the general foreman, Johnson encountered Gary Hinz, another foreman, who tried to stop him and was killed.

The last killing was tragic because it can be directly linked to the Chrysler corporation. For years workers at Eldon have complained about the grease on the floor of the plants and the unsafe conditions it creates. Joseph Kowalski, a job-setter, attempted to avoid Johnson but slipped on a grease spot and was hit by a stray bullet.

Johnson then left the plant, followed by a union steward, John Moffett. Johnson wheeled on Moffett and pulled the trigger but his 30-shot clip was empty. He dropped his gun and said, "I only regret I didn't get Jim Rhodes."

Johnson was charged with three counts of first-degree murder and is being held in the Wayne County Jail without bond. He is being defended by Kenneth Cockrel of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The League affiliate at the plant, the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) has been fighting for years against the oppressive conditions that caused James Johnson's mind to snap. Workers are fed up with continual management harassment and a sell-out union who refuses to take up their members' grievances. When they get no action through the union, they respond in other ways.

The press will attempt to say that James Johnson is crazy. Maybe he was or maybe his act was a moment of sanity in the madness of Detroit's industrial plants. Yet, whatever it was, we know it was the conditions at Eldon that made him act. Chrysler is the real murderer.

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