



# USA: A tale of two shootings

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Massive controversy has followed the 19 November acquittal of rightwing vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse in the US. Videos show Rittenhouse shooting dead two protestors and wounding at least one other in Kenosha, Wisconsin, during a 25 August 2020 protest against police shooting an unarmed Black man, Jacob Blake in the back seven times, paralysing him. After the announced acquittal, ex-NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick tweeted 'We just witnessed a system built on white supremacy validate the terroristic acts of a white supremacist?'. Predictably, right wing groups and even Donald Trump himself have called Rittenhouse a hero.

What is surprising is that some on the left have argued he was not a racist (his victims were white) or a fascist but simply defending himself, and those saying otherwise are just engaged in a supposed liberal-left 'culture war?'. If we step back from the various videos and debate about empirical points, treating it as an isolated incident, and put the case in the context of racism in the US, violent policing, and the growth of the far-right, it is clear that the killings and the acquittal are part and parcel of a racist, right wing judicial system.

## Rittenhouse and Reality

Protests sprung up in Kenosha over Jacob Blake's shooting, the latest in a long stretch since Trayvon Martin that have sparked a wider, and angrier movement demanding justice that rarely comes. Rittenhouse, 17, took an AR-15 ArmaLite Rifle and stood guard in front of a petrol station alongside far-right militia. The police actually gave them water and thanked them for coming. The police however attacked protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets, provoking an angry response with trashing and some setting fire to buildings. A completely unarmed man, possibly mentally ill, Joseph Rosenbaum saw Rittenhouse and 'attacked' him, possibly trying to disarm him, and was shot in the head, despite Rittenhouse admitting he realised Rosenbaum was unarmed.

Others, seeing the killing, identified Rittenhouse as a far-right 'active shooter?' in the words of one, and did try to disarm him. Anthony Huber was shot dead after hitting Rittenhouse with his skateboard 'hardly a lethal weapon. Gaige Grosskreutz, a paramedic and legal observer for the American Civil Liberties Union on the protest, was carrying a handgun, said he couldn't bring himself to shoot Rittenhouse so got shot and wounded in the arm instead. Bystanders pointed out Rittenhouse as the shooter to the police, still with the gun but with his hands up to surrender, but the police drove by without arresting him.

Some say it's not about race because he shot white activists 'who were protesting for Black Lives, race traitors in the parlance of the far right 'or was just defending himself. But what gave Rittenhouse the right to 'defend' himself, isn't it just as reasonable to say they were trying to defend themselves and their protest from him? Some have tried to paint Rosenbaum as responsible for his own death. He had mental health issues and had just been discharged from hospital, was acting aggressively and it has been questioned whether he was even a protestor, but the fact is he didn't attack anyone else on the protest. If Rittenhouse hadn't gone to Kenosha, no one would be dead.

The trial, presided over by a right wing judge, showed the same bias continues straight into the American 'justice' system. The judge barred prosecutors from calling the three shot men 'victims?', and from mentioning anything from Rittenhouse's social media before the killing, which would have shown that he was a fervently pro-Trump and pro-police online activist (he'd organised a fundraiser) pushing 'blue lives matter?', the right wing pro-police pushback against Black Lives Matter that is implicitly racist. Neither were they allowed to raise a video where they claimed he

said of black people outside a CVS store he assumes are shoplifters, "Bro, I wish I had my fucking AR, I'd start shooting rounds at them." His defence on the other hand was allowed to label the protestors as looters and rioters, and by extension Rittenhouse's victims, though there is no evidence that Huber or Grosskreutz at least were doing anything of the sort. It is contested whether Rosenbaum was trashing things, but Rittenhouse did not see him doing anything either way.

The fact that Rittenhouse got off was partly related to the judge's bias, partly to a nearly all-white jury, and partly to a top-level defence team provided by \$2million raised by the right and police groups, something working class and poor defendants would never have. He showed no remorse for his victims in the trial. Out on bail during the trial, he was photographed in a pub with members of the fascist Proud Boys, giving the white-supremacist upside down OK sign (he has said he didn't know what it meant) - the judge barred this being mentioned in court too. Trump congratulated him and Fox newscaster Tucker Carlson defended Rittenhouse and his actions, and implicitly anyone following his lead: "How shocked are we that 17-year-olds with rifles decided they had to maintain order when no one else would?"

#### Facts or Social context

"Facts" always have a social meaning, as reversing these roles shows. If a young black man had taken an automatic rifle onto the streets and into a right wing demo, and shot three protestors, he would likely have been shot by the police, even before the "protestors" could take care of him. If he were arrested, he would almost certainly have received a very long prison sentence or even the death penalty in another state. If a white left winger did the same, they would still be treated much worse than Rittenhouse. So, it isn't just a question of white privilege but also of the inherent anti-working class, anti-left bias in the "thin blue" frontline of the state, the police and behind them the judiciary and prison system under capitalism.

Tragically, we have proof of this. On the 28 August 2020 in Portland, Oregon, three days after the much publicised Kenosha killings, anti-fascist activist Michael Reinoehl shot and killed a far-right counter-demonstrator Aaron Danielson. Danielson at the time was armed with vicious anti-bear pepper-spray, an extendable police baton and a gun. After taking part in a provocative pro-Trump convoy during the day and drinking, Danielson and another, both tooled-up members of the far-right Patriot Prayer group, had deliberately walked into anti-police demonstrations. Reinoehl had just as much "right" to defend himself as Rittenhouse, and he stated before and after the shooting that he was trying to provide security for demonstrators against far right shooters. Whether true or false, after Kenosha it would be completely reasonable to believe Danielson would have attacked protestors. But the outcome couldn't have been more different. The police manhunt for Reinoehl saw him gunned down by federal marshals a few days later without any attempt to arrest him according to witnesses, who also say he had not pulled his weapon. Trump, who had previously called Reinoehl a "cold-blooded killer" gloated "we got him" to cheering fans: "This guy was a violent criminal, and the US Marshals killed him. And I'll tell you something, that's the way it has to be. There has to be retribution."

Trump has repeatedly hammered away at the trope of "far left fascism" and antifa violence, while refusing to condemn the real organised violence of the right and police, indeed comments like that above incite it. But Danielson's death was the first recorded killing by an antifascist, compared to 329 killed by white supremacists and other right wing extremists, according to a report going back 25 years by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It also found that in 2020 the right was responsible for 67 percent of domestic terror attacks and plots, with half of that violence targeting protestors. Meanwhile, other investigative outlets have shown the police are riddled with white supremacist groupings.

Trump, Fox News and the right turn reality on its head, whipping up an ideological bubble of racial threat and left wing conspiracy, to excuse and enable the repression of anti-racist protests by the police and militias. Ultimately, they are partly responsible for the Rittenhouse killings.

"We can't be biased?"

Some have said that if the situation were reversed then the left would be defending the accused and supporting their

acquittal, so we are treating Rittenhouse differently.

The truth is that left wingers don't saunter into far-right demos because they would be lynched. Far right protestors do this with such confidence, to intimidate or provoke protestors, because they know what the Rittenhouse case proved: the police, courts, Republican politicians and much of the media will defend them. Despite the presence of individual protestors with hand guns, the left is generally unarmed. Those small, organised armed responses that have developed are defensive, a protective response to far-right violence, but also inadequate ? the police will attack them not thank them. Meanwhile, armed mobilisations to intimidate or attack the left and minorities are the sole reason for fascist militias' existence.

Both results, Rittenhouse's acquittal and Reinhoehl's police murder, have been celebrated across the far right, with Trump leading the way, with one Proud Boy stating the violence won't stop till the left's bodies 'get stacked up like cord wood'. The lesson of Rittenhouse is the right can police, intimidate and repress our demos with impunity, the lesson of Reinhoehl is the system will defend them if we fight back. The verdicts will simply embolden the right who will see it as a licence to step up their armed 'security' on our protests. The only answer is organised self-defence.

Socialists support the right of workers and the oppressed to defend themselves, from picket line defence to the Black Panthers. We don't side with the police and courts when they condemn and criminalise the poor if they riot after police murders, burn down the police stations where they were fitted up, beaten and jailed, or loot shops for the things capitalism advertises but they can't afford.

However, riots are no answer. Only a mass movement based on organisations with delegates elected from neighbourhood committees, union branches and workplaces, colleges and schools, as well as left and anti-racist organisations, can create a sustained mass struggle for equality and justice. While that struggle would be overwhelmingly political, to disarm and defund the police and dismantle the incarceration state, such a movement would have to organise defence of its protests and communities from far right or police violence 'by any means necessary' and appropriate. Necessarily, a movement of the poor and working class, it could help build the forces to get rid of capitalism itself, the only way to rid the world of racism and police.

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