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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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25.11.2021

Groveland Four are exonerated more than 70 years after racist frame-up

The case of the Groveland Four, the infamous 1949 frame-up of four young black men on bogus rape charges, finally came to an end in a Florida courtroom on November 22, as a local judge voided the indictments of two of the men and vacated the convictions of the others. The action, more than 72 years after the false arrest, frame-up and extrajudicial killing of two of the men, came after many years of determined campaigning, including by family members of the accused.

The Groveland Four, so named after the central Florida town about 30 miles west of Orlando where they were arrested, predated and helped to fuel the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that finally put an end to the hated system of Jim Crow segregation and terror.

On July 16, 1949 Norma Padgett, a teenaged white girl, accused the four black men of rape. Her husband, who had a history of spousal abuse, testified that the four, who were aged between 16 and 26 at the time, had offered to help after his car had broken down, but that they then beat him and abducted his wife. The accused—Walter Irvin, Ernest Thomas, Charles Greenlee and Samuel Shepherd—were charged with sexually assaulting the young woman and were quickly arrested.



Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall, far left, and an unidentified man stand next to Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd and Charles Greenlee, from left, in Florida. The three men along with Ernest Thomas were accused of raping a white woman in 1949. (Photo: State Library and Archives of Florida)

What followed was all too typical of the Jim Crow era. Thomas managed to escape detention but was set upon by a posse of racists numbering, according to one account, as many as 1,000. He was caught and brutally murdered. The other three men were tortured, two of them confessing under duress. No evidence was presented other than these confessions, and the U.S. Supreme Court later threw out the convictions of Irvin and Shepherd.

The local sheriff, Willis McCall, supposedly taking the men for a hearing in November 1951, shot them in cold blood, claiming he acted in self-defense. Irvin only survived because he feigned death. He was later retried and only narrowly escaped the death penalty, with his sentence commuted to life in prison. He was paroled only in 1968, one year before he died. Charles Greenlee was the only one of the defendants who got more than a slight taste of freedom, having been paroled in 1962 and living another 50 years.

Lake County Circuit Court Judge Heidi Davis granted a motion from the state, voiding the convictions and dismissing the indictments of the Groveland Four. Local state attorney Bill Gladson said that new evidence had come to light. The authorities had recently spoken with a grandson of the state attorney who prosecuted the case decades ago. The grandson told investigators that he had found correspondence that convinced him that both the original judge and the prosecutor knew that no rape had occurred.

Carol Greenlee, the daughter of Charles, who was present in the courtroom when his conviction, as well as the charges against the others, were vacated, said that her father often found it too painful to recount his ordeal, but that she had persisted on his behalf and on behalf of many others. The nephew of Ernest Thomas, on the occasion of his uncle's exoneration, similarly expressed the hope that other victims of similar frame-ups would also have their names cleared, even if they were not alive to see that day.

The case of the Groveland Four also played a significant role in another act of racist terror during this period. Florida NAACP leader Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriette Moore were killed by a bomb blast at their home on Christmas Day 1951. Less than a month earlier, Moore had written an angry letter to the Governor of Florida demanding answers in the case of the incident in which Sheriff McCall killed Shepherd and seriously wounded Irvin. Moore was well known and bitterly hated by local authorities and especially by active members of the Ku Klux Klan. Moore's murder was never solved, although there can be little doubt as to who was behind it.

Less than four years later came the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, Jr. for allegedly whistling at a white woman. The murder of Till was an act of racist terror that ignited the mass movement, Southern-based but with active involvement from the North, which eventually dismantled the system of rigid segregation and second-class citizenship in those states that were the heart of the slave power before the Civil War.

Although Jim Crow is gone, the history of the struggle against it must be studied and understood by new generations of workers and youth maturing in today's political climate. Racism and xenophobia are indelibly associated with the name of the fascistic former president, the same Donald Trump who took out full-page newspaper advertisements in 1989 calling for the death penalty against the Central Park 5, the black teenagers falsely accused of sexually assaulting a white jogger in New York. The men were exonerated years later, but Trump has never taken back his filthy racist demagoguery.

Florida Republicans, including Governor Ron DeSantis, speak loudly of rectifying 72-year-old frame-ups while their party is fully embracing the xenophobia and fascistic demagoguery of Trump, and is energetically working to roll back the voting rights that were won during the peak of the civil rights struggles in the 1960s. These forces are also embracing murderous vigilantism such as that of Kyle Rittenhouse, whose acquittal in a

Wisconsin court last week was universally celebrated in ultra-right circles. Only 200 miles north of Groveland, Florida, the case of the three men who shot and killed Ahmaud Arbery, another case of racist vigilantism in which the killers make the phony claim of self-defense, has gone to the jury.

The Democrats, meanwhile, rely on racial and gender identity politics, which only play into the hands of the racists and the fascist militias. The case of the Groveland Four shows the danger of this reactionary politics. Just as the Groveland accused were denied their rights of due process and railroaded to prison without evidence other than the claim of the young woman who accused them, so today the #MeToo campaign is undermining due process and other basic legal and constitutional rights. The context may be different, but the example of the Groveland Four, like that of the Scottsboro Boys and numerous others, shows where these attacks can lead and who benefits from them.

World Socialist 24.11.2021