

AFL-CIO Executive Council Statement
Washington, D.C.
June 17, 2020

CONFRONTING RACIAL VIOLENCE

The labor movement gains its strength from our common belief that all people are inherently valuable and have an undeniable right to a fair, just and dignified life—regardless of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

However for far too long, Black Americans have struggled to be recognized as full human beings deserving of basic human rights—the rights to live safely and free from harm in their homes, workplaces and in their communities. In each generation, Black people living in America have been forced to bear witness to the gross lynchings of their people; and in the past several months, this generation of Black youth is in the same position.

On Feb. 23, 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed in a small Georgia suburb while out for an afternoon jog. For more than two months after his murder, Ahmaud's family mourned in silence while his killers remained free. Only when social distancing restrictions began to ease in Georgia and news and video of Ahmaud's murder gained national attention did the two White men charged with his killing get arrested. Since then, social media once again notified the nation about the killing of 26-year-old Breonna Taylor. On March 13, while sleeping in her home, Breonna was shot eight times and killed by police officers who entered the wrong house to serve a warrant for suspects already in police custody. She was struck by eight of at least 20 bullets that were fired into her home. On April 25, George Floyd was asphyxiated by a Minneapolis police officer who kneeled on him. The officer pressed his knee into the back of George's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds—even after he had stopped speaking or moving. And despite the protests in response to these killings of unarmed Black people that have sprung up in nearly every state and several countries around the globe, another unarmed Black man was killed by police on June 12. Twenty-seven-year-old Rayshard Brooks was shot by an Atlanta police officer after a call to respond to a sleeping man in the drive-thru of a fast-food restaurant. The officers responding to that call performed a field sobriety test that resulted in one of the officers shooting Rayshard three times, killing him. His death has been ruled a homicide.

The tragic deaths of these Black people, and the systemic racism manifested by these incidents, have reopened deep wounds across the country and left many wondering if Black lives will ever matter in America.

In 1955, a photo of Emmett Till's body after his gruesome lynching went viral. Racism, and all its insidiousness, was made plain in the media across the country. To this day, no one has been held accountable for his murder. Too often, we say the names of Black people who have been killed because we know their names from social media and videos of killings captured on cell phones. We know about these young Black lives from photos and videos that have been viewed millions of times.

In the labor movement, we stand shoulder to shoulder when an employer wields control with fear or violence. Likewise, we must urgently extend and deepen solidarity in our communities and public spaces, and demand accountability for Black lives. We must not allow escape from accountability for these four young lives, for Emmett Till, for all the lynchings we never see on social media or for the devastation of COVID-19 on Black families.

At a time when the world is struggling through a global pandemic that is exposing the disparities in health, well-being and economic security, the murders of these men and this woman further illustrates the devastating impact racism, white supremacy and violence have on Black people in America. Racism remains deeply rooted in America's society. At this time, too many people of color are out of work, disconnected from health insurance, and facing unfair and discriminatory barriers while they seek assistance for us to sit in silence as they suffer.

At moments like these, we in the labor movement cannot be silent and must express our collective outrage about the brutal murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks. The AFL-CIO will be deliberate in our commitment to advancing a full dialogue regarding racial disparities and violence in all our communities.

We will encourage our national affiliates and our state and local bodies to participate fully in a dialogue with our partners and allies. We will work diligently to support policies at the federal, state and local levels that eliminate discrimination, profiling and violence, and to denounce "stand your ground" laws that are advanced by anti-worker, pro-voter suppression advocates. And we will continue to boldly declare that Black Lives Matter.