

National Lawyers Guild of Milwaukee: Rittenhouse case cannot be allowed to embolden more white vigilantism

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People across the globe have watched with deep concern since August 25, 2020 when Kyle Rittenhouse killed two men until this month when he was put on trial in Kenosha, Wisconsin. His murderous actions have been endorsed by a well-funded campaign to raise him to hero status. This campaign threatens to dangerously normalize armed attacks on Black Lives Matter and allied demonstrators, and also to embolden white vigilantes to use life-threatening violence.

Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old at the time of the shooting, traveled from Antioch, IL, to Kenosha, WI, where he used an AR-15 ArmaLite rifle to join a group of vigilantes claiming to react to the unrest in Kenosha. Local protests began after the shooting of Jacob Blake seven times in the back by a white police officer. It is undisputed that Rittenhouse shot three people on August 25, 2020, seriously wounding one and killing two others. Among the vigilantes and police present that night, Rittenhouse was the only person who killed anyone during those protests. However, other so-called "militia" came with a large variety of weapons, allegedly to protect property; and the FBI separately arrested highly armed out-of-state white "militia" men who came to Kenosha with a "stockpile" of weapons with the asserted intention to both "loot and possibly pick people off."

In various videos from the evening, Rittenhouse was seen repeatedly telling others that he came to provide medical assistance, falsely claiming that he was an EMT. While all were in violation of the night's local curfew, it is disturbing to see the videos showing Rittenhouse and other heavily-armed vigilantes being welcomed by

local law enforcement. This acceptance of lawlessness by predominantly white gangs violating a curfew and in some cases illegally carrying firearms, demonstrates a problematic double standard. Meanwhile, perceived Black Lives Matter supporters were being told to leave, and/or being rounded up off the streets merely for being there.

The specter of self-deputized white citizens harming and killing Black civilians has terrified our communities for centuries. In 2012, Milwaukee County grieved the loss of 16-year-old Corey Stingley in West Allis, a Black high school student who was confronted and choked to death by a group of white men after a possible shoplifting attempt. None of his killers were charged. Vigilantism and the self-deputization of white civilians who then wield violence against Black citizens is not limited to Wisconsin. While the Rittenhouse trial unfolds in Kenosha, three men are on trial for the murder of jogger, Ahmaud Arbery, in Georgia. They claim they were performing a “citizen’s arrest” and accused Arbery of stealing, though there is no evidence of this. And many of us are familiar with the tragic 2012 death of Trayvon Martin who was murdered by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman claimed to be part of a community watch, and followed and killed Martin even after being told by a police dispatcher to disengage and go home. Because of the interpretation of Florida’s “stand your ground” law, Zimmerman was also ultimately acquitted after arguing that he killed Martin in self-defense.

These cases are disgustingly similar: there would have been no deaths had the killers not been acting as vigilantes. All three shooters claimed self-defense against their victims; yet, not one of those they killed displayed deadly weapons during the altercations. One need only think back to our nation’s shameful history of lynchings, with mobs of white people taking the law into their own hands, to know that we are walking a bloody path that threatens democracy and racial justice.

We must stand up against the growing threat of white vigilantes and armed mobs cosplaying a “militia.” They are emboldened by the lack of timely and vigorous prosecutions against them in such cases, and even seem to be tolerated and sometimes encouraged by law enforcement. We must carefully review the relevant laws that already exist, and see how they are being applied. Police must not explicitly or implicitly endorse vigilantism. Above all, we must insist that human rights and life must be protected and honored above property interests, not the other way around.