

The People's Tribunal on the Algiers Motel Killings

Many black Detroiters were angry when the officers involved in the Algiers Motel killings escaped indictment and the media proved unwilling to pursue the case. Inspired by SNCC organizer H. Rap Brown's call for "a people's tribunal" when he addressed a crowd of 5,000 in Detroit, young radicals led by Dan Aldridge and Lonnie Peek decided to hold one as a way to air a fuller version of the events to the community. "Watch accurate justice administered by citizens of the community," a flier announced. "Witness the unbiased, legal action of skilled black attorneys. Review and watch the evidence for yourself."

The "People's Tribunal," was held on August 30, 1967 at the Reverend Albert Cleage's church (which came to be known as the Shrine of the Black Madonna for the 18-foot Black Madonna painting by artist Glanton Dowdell installed in the sanctuary) . Originally scheduled to be held at Dexter Theater, the theater backed out. Cleage later claimed that it was held in his church because there were fears that the police would attack any other place. The Church's executive board made a public statement attesting to their reasons for holding it there: "we love our church and the building in which we worship. But even if granting permission for the People's Tribunal to be held here means the destruction of the building, as churches have been destroyed in Birmingham and all over the South, we still have no choice."

The Tribunal served as a people's version of the trial that a grieving black community had been denied by police cover-up. Those gathered heard the case against three white Detroit police officers, Ronald August, Robert Paille, and David Sendak and a black security guard charged in what witnesses called the "execution" of three young black men—Carl Cooper, Aubrey Pollard and Fred Temple—at the Manor House annex of the Algiers Motel on July 26, 1967, the fourth day of the Rebellion.

The church was packed to the rafters with over 2000 people, with others trying to get in. Journalists from France and Sweden covered the event. Attorney Milton R. Henry served as one of the two prosecutors; Solomon A. Plapkin, a white attorney, and Central Church member Russell L. Brown, Jr., acted as defense counsel. Kenneth V. Cockrel, Sr., a recent Wayne State University law school graduate and future co-founder of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), was the judge and moderator. The stenographer was Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, who would later serve as chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). They called witnesses. Because the police sought to intimidate the witnesses, organizers tried to keep them hidden until they testified.

Among the people selected to be jurors were African American novelist John O. Killens, bookstore owner Edward Vaughn and Rosa Parks. Dan Aldridge had asked Parks to serve as juror because of her reputation in the community as a person of integrity, and she had agreed, saying that if she could be helpful she would come. Mrs. Parks' willingness to take part in the Tribunal took great fortitude since she knew the family of Carl Cooper.

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The jury found the officers guilty of murder. The Detroit Bar Association considered disbaring the lawyers who participated in the trial. Cleage would write in the Michigan Chronicle. "It is hard to believe ...that a group of ordinary white men could so hate ordinary black men."

Related primary source: ['Acquit Detroit cop in killing of Negro youth in '67 riots' Chicago Tribune, 11 June 1969](#)