



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Socialism and dignity: The right to a funeral

written by Stephen Millies

September 22, 2024

This article was originally published on May 20, 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when mass burials were conducted in New York City's Potter's Fields.

Grave robbing is alive and well in the capitalist United States, where anything can be done for a profit. In a Sept. 16, 2024, report, [NBC News](#) exposed how the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth, Texas, has been selling body parts.

The medical school used unclaimed bodies from the Tarrant County and Dallas County medical examiners. NBC described how the body of the Black veteran Victor Honey — who was entitled to a burial with military honors — was treated:

"A Swedish medical device maker paid \$341 for access to Honey's severed right leg to train clinicians to harvest veins using its surgical tool. A medical education company spent \$900 to send his torso to Pittsburgh so trainees could practice implanting a spine stimulator. And the U.S. Army paid \$210 to use a pair of bones from his skull to educate military medical personnel at a hospital near San Antonio.

“In the name of scientific advancement, clinical education, and fiscal expediency, the bodies of the destitute in the Dallas-Fort Worth region have been routinely collected from hospital beds, nursing homes, and homeless encampments and used for training or research without their consent — and often without the approval of any survivors, an NBC News investigation found.

“Honey, who died in September 2022, is one of about 2,350 people whose unclaimed bodies have been given to the Fort Worth-based University of North Texas Health Science Center since 2019 under agreements with Dallas and Tarrant counties.”

Similar practices are undoubtedly occurring across the United States.



Mass burial at Hart Island.

No millionaire has ever been executed in the United States. Hardly any rich people have been buried in New York City's Potter's Field. Over a million poor people are

interred there on Hart Island off the Bronx.

Photographer George Steinmetz used a drone to [document the mass burials](#) of people who've died of the coronavirus. Police responded by detaining Steinmetz and seizing his drone.

Those who can't afford a funeral have their bodies dumped in trenches 15 feet wide and 8 feet deep. The gravediggers are prisoners from Rikers Island who, if they die in jail, will probably be buried there too.

Capitalism doesn't offer any respect for working and poor people, even in death. Everything is for sale, including last rites.



Picture The Homeless co-founder Lewis Haggins.

As the activist organization [Picture The Homeless](#) describes Potter's Field, it "is not the only insult the poor face ... but it's the final insult."

People who are killed being struck by trains, subways or buses — or die in them —

get buried on Hart Island if no one claims their bodies. PTH co-founder Lewis Haggins, who passed away on the subway on Dec. 23, 2003, was buried on Hart Island.

When PTH members tried to go to Haggins' grave site, they were forbidden to do so. Only relatives could visit. Authorities claimed it was a "security issue" since prisoners bury bodies.

The Civil Rights Committee of PTH had to wage a struggle just to say farewell. They won the right for people to pay their respects, to lay a flower, at the place where a friend or a stranger was buried.

Remember this whenever the capitalist media attack a socialist country for allegedly violating "human rights."

Robbing Black bodies

New Jersey Assemblymember Benjie Wimberly has [proposed a \\$20 million fund](#) to subsidize funerals in the Garden State. New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson has suggested a [similar local fund](#).

Currently, New York City's Human Resource Administration offers up to \$900 as a subsidy towards a funeral service. That's often not enough.

Families can have as little as 48 hours to claim their loved ones' bodies [under New York State law](#). Medical schools get first dibs on unclaimed remains. Mortuary schools get the rest in order to train students in embalming.

For centuries, medical students have dissected bodies in order to learn anatomy. That's necessary to train doctors.

This writer's father willed his body to a medical school. That was a voluntary act,

like people having their eyes donated to an eye bank after their death.

Shields Green and John Anthony Copeland Jr. didn't will their bodies to be cut up at Winchester Medical College. The Black freedom fighters captured at Harper's Ferry were hanged on Dec. 16, 1859, two weeks after John Brown was executed.

The book "Medical Apartheid" by Harriet Washington tells how Black cemeteries were given no respect by medical schools. Grave robbers and students would steal the bodies of African Americans. Some of the corpses were shipped to Northern medical schools in pickle barrels.

The first Indigenous mortuary science student at the Milwaukee Area Technical College explained why he wanted to become a mortician. He was sick of going to museums and seeing his ancestors in glass cases.

African bodies were put on display in European museums. The body of the South African woman [Sarah Baartman](#) was on display in a Paris museum until 1974. Her remains weren't returned to South Africa until 2002.

No dignity under capitalism

Milwaukee communist leader Albert Stergar would point out that the first working-class organizations were the "friendly societies." During the Industrial Revolution in Britain, their members would pay a small regular contribution to ensure having a funeral.

These societies had 925,429 members by 1815. E.P. Thompson, in "The Making of the English Working Class," wrote that this was the political culture which trained future labor leaders.

Slave masters tried to prevent funerals of enslaved Africans, fearing they could become organizing meetings for insurrections.

Establishing the African Burial Ground National Monument in Lower Manhattan took a struggle. The U.S. government sought to excavate the site.

The late Sonny Abubadika Carson, the late Elombe Brath, and the Rev. Herbert Daughtry, National Presiding Minister of The House of the Lord Churches, put their bodies on the line to stop the bulldozers.

Funeral directors were often the most prosperous members of Black communities and served as political leaders, like the Ford family in Memphis. The family of Michigan Congressperson Charles C. Diggs Jr. owned a funeral home.

When Diggs was elected to the House of Representatives in 1954, there were only two other Black congresspeople. After the Soweto uprising in South Africa on June 16, 1976, Diggs vowed to use his congressional seniority to help overthrow the apartheid regime.

Charles Diggs was instead railroaded to prison on phony charges.

All the socialist countries are targeted by the White House, the Pentagon, and Wall Street. For over 60 years, they've tried to strangle Cuba with an economic blockade.

This doesn't prevent Cuba from giving every person the dignity that capitalism can never offer. All Cubans are guaranteed a funeral.

Everyone deserves a homegoing. There will be no Potter's Fields after the socialist revolution.

