

Repression, Resistance, and Rebellion in “Police State Ferguson”

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Sunday, November 30, Ferguson, Missouri. The governor of Missouri declared a state of emergency on November 17, and this is what's been happening in Ferguson and St. Louis County, Missouri:

You drive past a major traffic and commercial intersection like Chambers and West Florissant and you see the cross-street barricaded by a half-dozen or so police cars with bubble lights flashing, crime scene tape, a military Humvee, armed soldiers, and more police in the Walgreen's / mini-mall across the street. You often hear helicopters circling overhead, at night sometimes you can see their searchlights sweeping nearby. Meanwhile, the airspace has been closed off to all other traffic, reportedly to prevent news helicopters from providing video and pictures of what is going on below.



You go to a protest—whether in the streets or at a shopping mall—and you see a heavy police presence, often backed up by uniformed military personnel and undercover cops. Nonviolent marches and rallies can be (and have been) declared “illegal assemblies” and then violently shut down on the slightest pretext. Sometimes this means massive riot vehicles firing volleys of teargas—effectively collective punishment of the whole crowd for the alleged actions of one or two. Sometimes military-like riot police line up threateningly, or even charge the crowd. Pepper spray, bean-bag rounds, and clubs have all been deployed and used. Those who speak up in outrage have been pointed out by the police, and then a gang of six or eight cops jump, throw down, arrest, and drag them away.

After claiming to be a democracy that respects the people's right to assemble, speak, and protest, the government has deployed dozens of police, spies, and military organizations that have been planning for months about how to contain and suppress expected protests. They've arrested more than 500 people in the area since August, and have conducted widespread surveillance on political activists, organizers, and journalists—some of whom

have then been arrested driving in their cars, or when they come to protests. Revolutionaries and other resisters have been targeted, slandered, and vilified in the media.

If all this was taking place in countries that the U.S. has a conflict with—like Russia, China, or Iran—the same mainstream media that are now supporting the repression of protesters and the people in Ferguson would be condemning those countries as “dictatorships” and “tyrannies.” Well, that is what is going on here.

Ferguson—Epicenter of an Uprising Rocking the Country

This is happening because Ferguson has been the epicenter of a powerful uprising that has rocked the whole country and awakened millions to the fraud of “civil rights progress” and “equal rights,” and to the reality of the vicious oppression and murder of Black and other oppressed people in America today.

Michael Brown was murdered by Ferguson cop Darren Wilson on August 8, triggering a massive rebellion and waves of protest across the country. The system responded with a military deployment in the streets of Ferguson that further outraged millions and exposed the founding lies of America: that this country is a global beacon of freedom, a place unlike any other in the world in its respect for people’s rights, including the right to speak out and to protest.

Since then, authorities in St. Louis County, as well as nationwide up to the highest levels, have been preparing for the day the prosecuting attorney’s office would announce whether Michael Brown’s murderer would even be charged.

Leading up to the announcement, Loyola University law professor and associate legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), Bill Quigley, wrote, “Dozens and dozens of different police forces will be surrounding the protesters in Ferguson when the Michael Brown verdict is announced. There will be federal FBI agents, Homeland Security, US Marshals, State Police troopers, County Sheriffs, and local city cops from the dozens of little towns in and around St. Louis.”

This is a system based on white supremacy, one whose functioning and interests are directly contrary to those of the vast majority of people, and one whose rule is maintained by violence. It’s a system that understands that particularly the Black masses—like the people who’ve risen up in Ferguson—pose a threat to its existence—including because when Black people rise up, it calls forward the best of other sections of the people. When they talk about government “of the people, by the people, for the people” they mean violently enforcing oppression.

In the 108 days between Michael Brown’s murder and the announcement that Wilson would walk free, the powers-that-be coordinated and built up their police response, including Governor Jay Nixon’s November 17 announcement of a state of emergency, even as they made a (thin) pretense that they would give protesters “an opportunity to express their first amendment rights,” as St. Louis Mayor Slay put it.

Then came the November 24 announcement that Darren Wilson was getting off free, that a Black person could be murdered in America any time, any place, by law enforcement in particular, without consequence. The rage that erupted was deep and wide. That night the system lashed back and the next day Nixon tripled the National Guard presence to 2,200,

escalated its role, and the police adopted even more aggressive tactics.

Police State Ferguson—This Is What American Imperialist Democracy IS Like

On Monday night, November 24, people in front of the Ferguson police station were confronted with huge riot vehicles, were massively tear gassed, and many were forced from the streets. Sixty-one were arrested that night, some with felony charges. And for all the system's bullshit about "outside agitators"—as if that is a bad thing—these were actually overwhelmingly local residents.



Tuesday night, November 25, the section of West Florissant around Canfield Apartments—where Michael Brown lived and was executed—was blocked off. Police declared illegal and broke up a protest of about 60 at the corner of Chambers and West Florissant without provocation. On South Florissant police tear gassed and dispersed a protest of hundreds in front of the police station.

Wednesday, the 26th, I saw police violently shut down a mass demonstration in central St. Louis, pepper spraying some demonstrators and snatching people just for speaking out.

Intimidation on Black Friday

Friday, the 28th, I saw a big police presence, including undercover cops in Walmart's parking lot. When I went up to one regular car with a young Black man inside to ask him what he thought of the Black Lives Matter boycott, he said, "Step back from the car." I thought he just meant to back off a little, but when I tried to ask him a question he began to get out and said more loudly, "No, I mean step back from the car." I did. He was an undercover pig and there were more nearby. There was also a large police presence at the Galleria in Richmond Heights. (See reports on the Black Friday protests.)

One of the activists who shut down a Walmart in St. Louis County told me:

There were aggressive, armed security and dogs at Walmart. We started chanting, and rallied at the exit. There was a wall of police. Police were yelling at shoppers: "If you're gonna shop, shop"—as if to warn people, don't pay attention to them. When we were chanting outside Walmart, police officers put hands on their pistols! I found that shocking, if believable. Almost grotesque in the sense that this is just a store. You have a police presence in a store to protect private property, and this holiday, and these transactions.

The Blinding of Dornella Conners

On Saturday, November 29, Dornella Conners, a young, pregnant Black woman, was in a car with her boyfriend simply trying to drive away from a police clampdown. The police blocked the car, front and back, and fired a bean bag at the window. It shattered the glass, sending shards of glass into her face and blinding her in one eye. “I weren’t looting or anything. I was just out with my boyfriend. We were just riding around respecting Mike Brown,” she told a local radio station. “How can a pregnant person in a car be causing chaos?” her father asked.

A Broad, Countywide, Unconstitutional Pattern of Repression

These are not isolated incidents. Kris Hermes, the National Lawyer’s Guild (NLG) legal worker vice president, described a broad multi-dimensional pattern of repression against the people and those protesting.

“Chasing people out of an area to disperse them, as happened on Tuesday, November 25, near the Ferguson Police Department, because of some property destruction, instead of allowing people to demonstrate—this was violating the constitutional right to assemble and protest.”

So is using weaponry against protesters like rubber and plastic bullets, pepper spray, and tear gas. “This is not individual punishment for breaking the law, this is collective punishment,” Hermes said. “Tear gas is indiscriminate. Shooting rubber bullets into a crowd is indiscriminate. Pepper spray is indiscriminate.”

One particularly egregious example was the tear gassing of people at MoKaBe’s Coffeehouse in south St. Louis in the early morning hours of Tuesday, November 25. This was supposed to be a safe space and people were in the café and outside on the patio having coffee, a popular hangout for people active in the struggle for justice for Michael Brown and VonDeritt Myers Jr., a young Black man who was shot eight times and murdered by St. Louis police on October 8. But around 1:00 am, police fired tear gas at people at the café, and then a little later even tear gassed people attempting to get to St. John’s Episcopal Church, another safe haven. Jennifer McCoy, an NLG legal observer, told me that when people went into the church, there was so much tear gas on their clothes that they were forced back outside.



The NLG’s Hermes said that widespread arrests as well as blocking off streets—a stretch of

West Florissant in this case—are also a means of preventing or suppressing protest. One hundred twenty people had been arrested since Monday night when the grand jury decision was announced, 30 of them for felonies. Contrary to all the government and media talk about the uprising being driven by outsiders, Hermes said, “The vast majority were local residents.”

Quigley—the CCR’s constitutional law expert—wrote that the whole notion that the government can tell people when, where, and how to protest—as police have been doing in Ferguson—is unconstitutional.

“The government will say people can only protest until a certain time, or on a certain street, or only if they keep moving, or not there, not here, not now, no longer. Such police action is not authorized by the U.S. Constitution. People have a right to protest, the government should leave them alone.”

Quigley points out that police intimidation—showing up in full riot gear—is also an unconstitutional suppression of dissent.

The National Guard—Actively Helping Suppress Protest

The National Guard has been portrayed as playing a passive role in simply protecting property, but Hermes emphasized this is not the case, that they are playing an active role in suppressing protest: “The National Guard has helped block off an entire stretch of West Florissant, preventing vehicular and pedestrian traffic, which is itself a suppression of rights.

“The National Guard,” Hermes added, “has also appeared on the scene at the Ferguson Police Department, an act of intimidation and a form of policing against crowds there to peacefully protest. Friday night, there were a couple dozen or so National Guard there. Together with law enforcement agencies they outnumbered the protesters. This kind of massive show of force is a form of intimidation.”

Widespread Surveillance and Targeting of Activists

Hermes stressed that “heavy surveillance has been a foundation” of what the police have been doing.

“They are intensely videotaping activists across the St. Louis area, targeting particular people and picking particular people out of a crowd—often for brutal arrest. They’re going after organizers.”

One example was the arrest of videographer and live-streamer Bassem Masri, who has been very prominent and active in the protests. He was being followed by police and was then arrested and detained on a \$15,000 cash bond for allegedly driving a vehicle with a revoked license. This constitutes an act of preventive detention. The Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee in St. Louis quickly raised the money through crowdfunding to get Masri out.

Hermes reports that:

“Some of what is going on is people are being filmed, and if they seem to be leaders or organizers, they are then later targeted at demonstrations. This has been common and has happened over and over again. The protests have been going on weeks and weeks and this has gone on for that time. I would say dozens of times. It’s a practice they’ve been using since August. There have been over 500 arrests since then.”

Three NLG legal observers were illegally arrested on November 21 while monitoring and filming the police.

The Bronx Defenders, a legal group whose mission is to “zealously defend the rights of clients, fight for systemic change and promote justice for the community,” sent a delegation to Ferguson and their Tweets paint a similar picture:

Like in the Bronx, but perhaps even more marked here, it’s clear the legal system as a whole is ground zero for injustice in #Ferguson.

Heard a LOT this evening at county jail from protestors & spectators hauled in on trumped up charges and abused by police in #Ferguson.

The St. Louis County police denying access to counsel here in Clayton to visit with arrested #Ferguson protestors.

NYPD Spying on Protest Leaders

It has also been reported (WNYC, November 25) that the NYPD has sent experts to Ferguson to identify “professional agitators.” “We have a number of our detectives out there, have had them out there for over a week to help out in terms of intelligence we have on some of the professional agitators who are involved in these types of activity,” NYPD Commissioner William Bratton said.

Coming from New York’s police commissioner, this is an outrageous self-exposure and admission of illegal actions by the authorities. First, it’s not against the law to be a “professional agitator,” whatever that means. The targeting of “agitators” is not being based on any specific allegations of illegal activity but simply people the NYPD doesn’t think have the right to speak out against police brutality and murder!

Reports seem to indicate this strategy is being put into action: In Ferguson as well as in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities, activists and “agitators,” including communist revolutionaries, have been targeted simply for political speech, and snatched out of crowds and arrested.

What’s described above is, no doubt, just some of the state’s illegitimate violence, violation of rights, and repression being wreaked on the people. Email your stories to revolution.reports@yahoo.com. The whole world needs to know!

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