

# Scenes from Ferguson: the Uprising's Reach, and the Reaction

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Global Research, December 14, 2014

[Revolution](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*I've been in Ferguson since November 22, and I don't think a day has gone by where there hasn't been a protest, most often multiple protests. There may be one at the Ferguson police station, and another in the St. Louis Shaw neighborhood, just south of the City Center, or perhaps on one of the campuses: Washington University, St. Louis University, the University of Missouri St. Louis, and/or out in Clayton or West County.*

Last night, Monday, December 8, 250 people packed a meeting of the Ferguson Commission, formed by Governor Jay Nixon to look into the social and political conditions behind the "unrest" and make recommendations so the St. Louis area can become a "stronger, fairer place for everyone to live." The meeting took place in the Shaw neighborhood, near where 18-year-old Vonderrit Myers Jr. was murdered by police. Things went as planned until St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson began reading his remarks. The room erupted with protest and boos and Dotson was forced to stop speaking. Some people left, fed up with the meeting. Others stuck around, hoping this state-led process might work.

The day before that, 80 people protested in the Shaw area against the St. Louis Police Department's "finding" on Friday that they committed "no criminal wrongdoing" when they shot and killed Vonderrit Myers Jr. on October 8. (The county prosecutors have supposedly not yet decided whether or not to charge Myers' killer.) Twenty others protested police murders at a performance of *Annie* at the Fox Theater attended by hundreds of parents and children. "They got to see what's going on in the world," one demonstrator told the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (December 8, 2014). "They're going to be thinking about it, and they're going to be asking their parents questions."

## **Rams Players Step Up: "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and "I Can't Breathe"**

It hasn't just been street protests. The "hands up, don't shoot" action by five National Football League (NFL) St. Louis Rams players on November 30, as they came into the stadium for their game with the Oakland Raiders, sent a jolt through America. According to the wife of one of the Rams players, they've received death threats for their action, which disrupted America's revolting culture of "things are fine/ignore the oppression of Black people," of which the NFL is a big part.

The St. Louis Police Officers Association (SPOA) immediately demanded that the players be punished by the Rams organization and by the NFL. In other words, the pigs can murder people and then dictate what any prominent, influential people can even say anything about it! (The SPOA claimed that Rams officials had apologized, but the Rams denied this, and the NFL refused to sanction the players.)

Meanwhile, “Fans departing the Dome, site of a 52-0 drubbing of the Oakland Raiders, were met by helmeted city police officers, National Guard units, and protesters shouting ‘Those killer cops have got to go’ and other chants, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported (December 1, 2014). “‘Social media wasn’t enough,’ said Mickey Greer, 22, of Peoria, Ill., who recently joined the protests. ‘I decided to step it up and show change with my body by getting out here and doing something.’”

The day after the Rams’ “hands up” action, the Time Out Sports Bar & Grill in St. Louis disowned the Rams. “Due to the bone headed ‘hands up, don’t shoot’ act by the number of Rams players,” Time Out declared on its Facebook page it was taking all the pictures and information about the Rams off its walls, and that it would no longer have “Happy Hour” to celebrate Rams games. “We need to stand up to thugs who destroy our community and burn down local businesses, and boycott the other thugs/organizations who support them.”

This reaction itself generated a huge reaction. Nearly 40,000 people “liked” the post. But it also got 6,500 comments, many of which denounced the action and forced the bar to retreat a bit, declaring in another post that it wasn’t “taking sides” and supported the right to free speech and protest but still opposed the Rams “bringing the protest to a nationwide professional sporting event.” It also said that henceforth, “Happy Hour” would only be celebrated for Kansas City Chiefs games. The next night protesters briefly shut down two of Time Out’s St. Louis locations. (Huffington Post, December 3, 2014)

None of this has stopped some Rams players from continuing to speak out! Sunday, before the Rams’ game with Washington (I’ll be damned if I’m going to write that team’s racist nickname), they made what the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called “another societal statement,” this time with “I Can’t Breathe,” referring to the NYPD’s choking of Eric Garner to death. According to *CBS News* on December 8:

R.I.P Eric Garner [pic.twitter.com/i84grny7pR](https://pic.twitter.com/i84grny7pR)

— Davin Joseph (@DavinJoseph75) [December 7, 2014](#)

Guard Davin Joseph wrote the words on the cleats he wore during pre game warm-ups. ...Tight end Jared Cook had it written on his wrist tape. Receiver Kenny Britt had several names—including Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin—written on his blue and gold cleats. The names were of black men or teens whose deaths led to protests.

Joseph tweeted an image of his shoes before the game (above).

Players at other NFL games expressed similar sentiments. Detroit Lions running back Reggie Bush had “I Can’t Breathe” written in black across his blue warm-up shirt. Browns cornerback Johnson Bademosi wrote the message on the back of the shirt he wore before a game in Cleveland. San Diego Chargers linebacker Melvin Ingram did the same.

“Honestly, I’ve always been the quiet kid. I’ve always been the one who’s reserved, to kind of sit back and not really get into politics and things like that,” said Bush, whose mother has been a police officer for about 20 years. “But I don’t know why I just felt some kind of ... I guess the situation just touched me.

“It’s kind of resonated with me,” Bush said. “Not because I’ve been through a similar situation or because I’ve seen anybody go through it. I just really felt terrible about what was going on these past couple of weeks.”

### **Artists: “We Are Ferguson”**



Scene from “We Are Ferguson,” part of the Public Media Commons Artists Showcase. Photo: Special to revcom.us

Artists are also responding to the murder of Mike Brown and the outpouring against police murder. One way was the Public Media Commons Artists Showcase of the work of 17 area artists that took place Tuesday night, December 2, at the outdoor Public Media Commons, located in the Grand Center Arts District of St. Louis.

Most of the works were short audio-video narratives projected on two of the walls of this open-air plaza between buildings. The works, including a beautiful abstract soundscape turned to light show; a video of a quartet (violin, piano, bass, and percussion) performing an abstract improvisational piece, one of voices from the community; and a dramatic 10-minute photo montage of pictures and sounds from the August uprising in Ferguson right after Mike Brown was murdered, by artists Chris Renteria and Darian Wigfall, titled “We Are Ferguson,” concluded with audio of tear gas, rubber bullets and flash-bang grenades being fired on protesters on August 17, as the screen goes dark. A very powerful poem read “live” by a local person concluded one portion of the show.

### **Pilgrimages to Memorial for Mike Brown**

Another important dimension of how deeply Mike Brown’s murder and the Ferguson revolt has impacted millions of people is how the memorial to him on Canfield Drive, where he lived and was gunned down, has become a site of pilgrimages. People from different parts of the U.S. but also internationally have come to see the memorial, a tribute in the center of the street where he lay dead for four-and-a-half hours, and another against a lamppost on the side of the street, to let the reality of these events sink in, for people to pay their respects, express their condolences, reflect, and in some cases to report. During one 30-

minute visit, I saw media from Canada's *Globe & Mail* newspaper, South Korean TV, and Danish TV. Others come through at most hours of the day and into the night, having their pictures taken there and seeing what it all looks like.

One *Revolution* newspaper reader wrote about her experience:

Visiting the spot where Mike Brown was murdered, you are struck by the fact that it's such a small road, winding through a quiet housing development. Now there is a permanent collection of messages and mementos piled up in the middle of the road and crawling steadily up the nearest light pole. You realize that it has become a kind of pilgrimage site. In the middle of the afternoon or late in the evening, people are there. Some just take photos and seem lost in thought, reading the messages of loss and anger, while others want to share their feelings. And just as likely as not, reporters will be there. We met one from LA and another camera crew was setting up as we left.

One Palestinian American family drove from Memphis to visit Ferguson and the memorial to Michael Brown. When asked of the father why they came, he said his teenage daughters demanded they come. We asked his daughter what she thought of the grand jury decision; she said it was "messed up." A woman who lives close to the memorial described the checkpoints in Ferguson where only people with Ferguson ID can pass through and the police escort you to your destination. The Palestinian man exclaimed that that's just like Palestine! He wanted to be sure that all the people visiting the memorial then knew that the people of Palestine knew about and supported their struggle for Justice.



Photo: Special to revcom.us



## **Small Businesses... Not All Focused on “Property Damage”**

One night I went out for dinner and talked with a member of the Black family that owns a small local chain of restaurants, one of which is in Ferguson. Several of the windows were still boarded up, and she described how they'd been broken into on November 24, the night of the uprising after the grand jury refused to indict Darren Wilson. Other than some broken windows, not a lot of damage had been done. She was matter-of-fact about it, and not mad at the protesters. She said that people from the neighborhood had warned the authorities in September that if Darren Wilson wasn't indicted, they were going to “burn it down.” She also said that some of the businesses were targeted because even though they had standing and a voice within the community and power structure, they hadn't spoken up on behalf of those who fork over their money to them. The restaurant had some [www.revcom.us](http://www.revcom.us) leaflets on one of the tables, along with other announcements and literature.

It turned out the woman I was talking with had seen my [intervention in Gov. Nixon's press conference on CNN](#) and, like many others, she got a big smile on her face, chuckled, and thanked me for what I'd done. It's been interesting how much of this I've gotten, online and in person. People feel so frustrated and insulted by all the bullshit that's shoved at them on TV, that when someone breaks the rules of “civility,” that is, going along with the program and who “did not back down,” as one person put it, but instead turns the tables on the authorities and puts them on the defensive (rendering these supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful rulers tongue-tied and evasive, if only for a few minutes, gives people heart and joy. It's a small example of the enormous potential for a revolutionary pole that gets projected into society, to attract millions. (Last I looked, nearly 24,000 people had looked at one of the YouTubes of the intervention.) She was excited about talking to me, and said she was going to go home and look closely at the whole [revcom.us](http://www.revcom.us) website.

## **Up Against the Deep Structures and Reactionary Ideology of White Supremacy**

The people have had a lot of initiative over these past weeks and months, but make no mistake: They are up against the deeply entrenched structures and ideas of white supremacy, and an active reaction against the people's upsurge.

One way this hit me was a nighttime drive through the streets of north St. Louis, past row after row, street after street of mostly two-story red-brick houses and apartments, some dating back to the late 1800s. A fair number are abandoned, some are probably squats, most look very rundown, some look uninhabitable.

Wells/Goodfellow is one of the neighborhoods of north St. Louis. According to 2000 census data, 8,193 people lived there, nearly 30 percent fewer than a decade earlier. Ninety-eight percent were Black. Of 4,063 housing units, 27 percent, nearly 1,100, were unoccupied.

Admittedly, this was one drive through and no doubt there are nuances I didn't see. But all in all it was a desolate looking scene, and an outrageous indictment of the richest country in the world leaving whole areas and whole sections of the people to rot, unable to provide the most basic needs of life. The look and feel was a glaring example of how the old Jim Crow has become the New Jim Crow, with Black people still suffering horrific national oppression, just in somewhat different forms.

Not far away, and not unconnected from life in north St. Louis, is a 175-acre factory complex

that from 1954-1981 was the Union Boulevard General Motors Assembly plant. It once employed 13,000 and churned out the Chevy Caprice, Impala, pickup trucks, and the Corvette. It's now a business park, but was stone silent the night I drove by.

St. Louis was once second only to Detroit in auto employment, 35,000 at its peak. These were manufacturing jobs that provided workers, including some Black workers, with something of a stable, "middle class" income. But those days are long gone; by 2010, not only was GM gone, but the Ford planet in Hazelwood and the Chrysler planet in Fenton were shuttered as well. The workings of global capitalism demand that the auto industry, like all others, pursue the highest rates of exploitation and profit possible, or be eaten alive in cutthroat competition with rival capitalists. And beyond the loss of these jobs, many more workers in factories that supplied the auto plants with parts and services were made "unnecessary" in the outlook of the capitalist class,. In 2011, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote that GM's 1981 closing "seemed to kick open the door to a mass migration of manufacturing jobs, automotive and otherwise. In the years since, a cornerstone of the regional economy has slowly crumbled, shedding middle-class jobs to largely nonunion, right-to-work states and, more recently, emerging economies overseas."

U.S. capitalism now has no place and no future for millions of Black people, creating what the capitalists consider to be a surplus, and superfluous, population that it has been trying to suppress through prisons and police terror.

Expressions of white supremacy aren't, of course, ancient history. When the NAACP went through the town of Rose Bud on their civil rights march from Ferguson to Jefferson City, the Missouri state capital, they were met by a crowd of some 200, including openly racist whites flying a Confederate flag and shouting racist vitriol. Some among them had put out on the street a bucket of fried chicken, a melon, and a 40-ounce beer bottle. One white youth had a sign saying "go home."

On Wednesday, December 3, a white man aggressively drove through a crowd of protesters in downtown St. Louis and then started waving an automatic pistol at them when they surrounded his car. Being an armed white man, as opposed to an unarmed Black youth, he was detained by police, but without being shot and killed.

A growing number of white people are awakening to the ugly, intolerable reality of white supremacy and the oppression of Black people in America, and hollow talk that it's "moved beyond" race. One young white woman I met at a protest had a sign reading "My life changed when I started listening." She talked about not having realized what was going on, but being awakened by the murder of Mike Brown and the uprising against it. She now feels compelled to speak out. Another, at another protest, carried a sign reading "White Silence Is Violence."

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