

The Police Murder in St. Louis and the Militarization of American Society

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Yet another unarmed young man has been shot to death, execution style, by police on the streets of an American city. In response to demonstrations of popular outrage, riot police have attacked protests with tear gas and rubber bullets and arrested scores of people. A pregnant woman says she was thrown on the ground, maced and held at gunpoint.

The victim this time is 18-year-old Michael Brown, riddled Saturday with a dozen bullets from the gun of a cop in the St. Louis, Missouri suburb of Ferguson.

The anger that has engulfed metropolitan St. Louis is entirely justified. The police put out brazen lies, the standard fare in the string of incidents of homicidal violence against working people and youth. The Ferguson police have chosen to go with the claim, used so often in past killings by police, that Brown “reached for the gun” of the killer cop.

But numerous eyewitnesses describe a wanton and brutal murder. As Brown and a friend walked down the street, they were ordered by a still unnamed police officer to get on the sidewalk.

When the youth failed to respond quickly enough, the cop backed his vehicle into them, grabbed Brown by the neck and shot him. His friend told the media the cop shot again, hitting Brown in the back as he fled for his life. He then shot the youth several times in head and chest as he raised his hands and attempted to kneel to the ground.

The scene of Brown’s lifeless body, left lying in a pool of blood for hours, provoked an outpouring of outraged protest by family members and neighbors. Protests have continued in the face of police repression, reflecting the deep social anger that exists in every American city over police violence, unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Both the killing of Brown and the police response to the ensuing protests shed light on the militarization of American society. The police, armed with the most advanced weaponry, act as a law unto themselves, assuming the power of judge, jury and executioner.

Ferguson has been turned into what one police officer and several media commentators have referred to as a “war zone.” Hundreds of riot police from surrounding cities have laid siege to the neighborhood with armored vehicles, attack dogs, paramilitary weapons and helicopters. At the request of St. Louis County police, the Federal Aviation Administration has imposed airspace restrictions over the town, banning aerial media coverage and limiting the skies to police operations.

The scenes of SWAT teams clad in military fatigues, armed with automatic rifles and tear gas masks, accosting and arresting unarmed residents resembles nothing so much as the lockdown of Boston, Massachusetts following the Boston Marathon bombings last year.

Describing the crackdown Tuesday, “NBC Nightly News” anchor Brian Williams said it looked like a “police state,” adding that SWAT teams were using the “same tactical get up and same tactical weaponry we’ve come to expect in urban warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Under the direction of the Obama administration, local police forces have been equipped with billions of dollars in equipment transferred from the Defense Department, all but obliterating the line between local police and the military (see: [America’s paramilitary police](#)).

The murder of Michael Brown is the latest in a series of unprovoked police killings, including that of Eric Garner, who was choked to death by police in New York City on July 17. With at least 130 people killed by police in the United States since the start of 2014, hardly a week goes by without a video coming to light of some outrage by the police.

In the absence of any policies to address the worsening social crisis in the United States, police repression has become the de facto “urban policy” of both parties.

Austerity measures implemented by the Obama administration and the Democrats and Republicans at every level of government—from the slashing of food stamps and long-term unemployment benefits, to the attacks on health care, public education and retiree benefits—have only exacerbated the social crisis. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve floods the financial markets with unlimited and virtually free money, and corporate profits, buoyed by the lowering of wages and ever-greater exploitation of the working class, set new records.

The instinctive response of the ruling class is to treat working class neighborhoods all across the country as war zones, inhabited by a hostile population that must be suppressed. Democratic rights, including safeguards against unreasonable searches and seizures and restrictions on domestic military deployments, have been effectively abolished.

The militarization of the police in America is the flip side of the violent foreign policy of the United States. Both processes stem from the economic decay of American capitalism and the recklessness of a ruling class that hopes to resolve its crisis through violence and plunder.

The war that is being waged is a class war. In this war, the working class as a whole is pitted against the financial aristocracy, the two big business parties, and the institutions of the state that function, with increasing openness and brutality, as guardians of private wealth and the capitalist profit system.

The response to the killing of Brown by local Democrats, the NAACP and the inevitable Al Sharpton should be treated with the contempt it deserves. The calls for federal investigations, appeals to the FBI, the Justice Department and the Obama administration, the attempt to focus anger entirely along racial lines—all of this is aimed at obscuring the basic class issues and channeling social anger back behind the very forces responsible for the social crisis engulfing America.

As for Obama himself, the president broke days of silence on the murder of Brown by taking a momentary break from his vacation at the wealthy retreat of Martha’s Vineyard to issue a

perfunctory statement bemoaning the “strong passions” created by the shooting and urging everyone in Ferguson, Missouri and across the country to “remember this young man through reflection and understanding.”

So states the man presiding over the militarization of the police, massive and illegal surveillance of the entire population, torture and war crimes abroad and a class war program of austerity at home.

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