

US Establishment Shields Killer Cops

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Within three days of a judge's ruling acquitting a Cleveland cop who brutally murdered two unarmed people, the Obama administration announced a settlement with the city that holds no one accountable for a string of police murders and leaves the existing apparatus of violence and terror intact.

These developments taken together reveal a basic reality of social and political life in America: the categorical defense by the entire political establishment and all official institutions of a paramilitary police force that has been granted a license to kill.

The court ruling exonerated Officer Michael Brelo of manslaughter charges stemming from the deaths of Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams, who were killed November 29, 2012 after police fired more than 130 rounds into their car. Forty-nine of those shots were fired by Brelo, who jumped onto the hood of the car and shot the unarmed occupants directly through the windshield 15 times.

Brelo was one of over a hundred cops who participated in a high-speed chase through Cleveland that culminated in a fusillade of bullets comparable to the killings of unarmed civilians at military checkpoints that became a common feature of the US military occupation of Iraq.

Judge John O'Donnell acquitted Brelo on the pseudo-legal grounds that the prosecutors had not proven that Brelo's bullets were the ones that actually killed the two victims. Providing a judicial imprimatur for police to act as judge, jury and executioner, he declared, "Brelo's entire use of deadly force was a constitutionally reasonable response to an objectively reasonably perceived threat of great bodily harm from the occupants" of the car.

Meanwhile, no charges have been brought against a Cleveland cop who last November shot twelve-year-old Tamir Rice for holding a toy gun, and then failed to provide first aid as the child lay dying on the ground.

The same glaring disparity between homicidal police violence and the official response is expressed in the Obama Justice Department's toothless settlement with the Cleveland police. The settlement stems from a Justice Department investigation that cited multiple cases of wanton and unconstitutional police violence and concluded that the Cleveland police department engaged in a pattern of "unnecessary and excessive use of deadly force, including shootings and head strikes with impact weapons," as well as "the unnecessary, excessive or retaliatory use of less lethal force including Tasers, chemical spray and fists."

The agreement, signed by the city authorities, mandates a handful of trivial "reforms," including the hiring of more minority officers and the creation of a Community Police

Commission to give the appearance of oversight. It also calls for additional funding for the police.

Far from being an aberration, Cleveland is one of at least 19 cities where the Justice Department has since 2000 found a “pattern or practice of excessive force.” Just over the past three years, Justice Department inquiries have reported systematic brutality and violations of democratic rights by police in Ferguson, Missouri; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington.

This has not prevented President Obama from declaring that the murder last August of 18-year-old Michael Brown by Ferguson cop Darren Wilson is “not typical of what happens across the country.” Wilson was exonerated by a rigged grand jury, as was New York City Officer Daniel Panteleo for the choking death of Eric Garner.

In working-class communities throughout the United States, police function as de facto death squads, treating workers and youth as an occupied population to be held in check with brutality and even murder. The methods of military violence developed in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the so-called “war on terror” have been brought home for use against the US population.

Brelo personifies the convergence between the police and the military. An Iraq war veteran, Brelo told police investigators that he used his Marine training in deciding to “elevate” himself onto the hood of his victims’ car and “push through the target.”

So far this year, police have killed 455 people in the United States, putting them on track to take significantly more lives in 2015 than the 1,100 they killed last year. Every year, cops kill more people in the United States than the number of US soldiers killed in Iraq in 2004, at the height of the conflict, and police killings account for one out of every 16 homicides in the US.

The wave of police violence in the United States is not some excrescence of American “democracy.” It is deeply embedded in the structure of American society and rooted in the capitalist system and its irreconcilable class antagonisms. These have been immensely heightened by the unprecedented growth of social inequality, itself bound up with the deindustrialization of cities such as Cleveland, the impoverishment of the working class, and the obscene enrichment of a new financial aristocracy.

The buildup of a militarized police force to occupy the cities is the ruling class’s response to the growth of popular opposition to its policies of war abroad and austerity at home. Far from doing anything to ameliorate mass poverty and inequality, America’s financial elite responds to any sign of opposition with overwhelming and murderous violence.

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