

US Police Unions in Opposition to Free Speech, Encourage and Sustain Police Violence

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Since when did we decide that police officers should be above the law?

Two of the biggest police unions in the country are now on record in opposition to free speech. They are on record against constitutionally protected free speech that opposes the epidemic of police violence across America (more than 900 killed by police so far in 2015).

The current round of police union intimidation tactics started October 24, after filmmaker Quentin Tarantino spoke briefly to the ["Rise Up October" protest](#), a "Call for a Major National Manifestation Against Police Terror." The crowd of thousands [marched peacefully up Sixth Avenue](#) for two miles and included some 100 families impacted by police violence and killing. Police unions have reacted with violent rhetoric to Tarantino's brief "speech," which [offered a non-specific truism](#) (here in its entirety):

Hey, everybody. I got something to say, but actually I would like to give my time to the families that want to talk. I want to give my time to the families. However, I just do also want to say: What am I doing here? I'm doing here because I am a human being with a conscience. And when I see murder, I cannot stand by, and I have to call the murdered the murdered, and I have to call the murderers the murderers. Now I'm going to give my time to the families. [emphasis added]

The event [centered on victims of police violence](#) . There is no doubt that police have killed unarmed, innocent people. There is no doubt that a few cops have been convicted of murder. The reality of police violence is beyond dispute and longstanding. It goes with the territory, and [responsible police leaders everywhere](#) know perfectly well that part of their job is not only to keep their officers safe, but also, and arguably more important, to keep the public safe from their officers. The question is why they do so little about police violence.

In the aftermath of the [Rise Up October](#) rally, there were a reported 11 arrests, two of which on video show [gangs of police roughing up single, unresisting men](#). Even though the demonstration was peaceful and had a lawful parade permit, police turned out in force. No police officers were reported hurt, except for their feelings.

Police union goes ad hominem with attack on First Amendment

The day after the rally, Patrick Lynch, president of the New York police union (Patrolmen's Benevolent Association) went on the offensive, as he often does. He ignore the vast substance of the Rise Up October group and chose instead to make an ad hominem personal attack on Hollywood director Tarantino and his right to free speech. [Lynch's press](#)

[release in its entirety](#):

It's no surprise that someone who makes a living glorifying crime and violence is a cop-hater, too. The police officers that Quentin Tarantino calls 'murderers' aren't living in one of his depraved big screen fantasies — they're risking and sometimes sacrificing their lives to protect communities from real crime and mayhem. New Yorkers need to send a message to this purveyor of degeneracy that he has no business coming to our city to peddle his slanderous 'Cop Fiction.' It's time for a boycott of Quentin Tarantino's films.

Actually the police officers that Tarantino calls "murderers" are in fact murderers, which is why Tarantino called them murderers - because, although they are but a small percentage of the total police cohort, they have murdered people, mostly without significant consequence to themselves. On October 30, Lynch sent [another press release featuring Tarantino's father](#) saying, "Cops are not murderers, they are heroes," which is the police union party line. In reality, it should go without saying, most cops are neither murderers nor heroes. Like the first press release, this one also ignored the complaints of police brutality, but it omitted the proposed boycott, too.

Whistling much the same tune, [Rupert Murdoch's tabloid, the New York Post](#), covered the protest with open hostility. The paper made the editorial choice to run a picture of a demonstrator giving a cop the finger. And its story suggested that years of police violence were somehow beyond objection because a police officer was recently killed in the line of duty, even though there was no connection between the recent murder and the years of police abuse:

Just four days after [the on-duty murder of a hero NYPD street cop](#), a rally in Washington Square Park against 'police terror' devolved Saturday into a raucous, law-enforcement gripe-fest.

Los Angeles police claim victimhood, too, and backs boycott

Craig Lally, president of the LA police union, the Los Angeles Police Protective League, jumped on the boycott Tarantino bandwagon on October 27 in a [somewhat more nuanced press release](#) [in its entirety]:

We fully support constructive dialogue about how police interact with citizens. But there is no place for inflammatory rhetoric that makes police officers even bigger targets than we already are. Film director Quentin Tarantino took irresponsibility to a new and completely unacceptable level this past weekend by referring to police as murderers during an anti-police march in New York. He made this statement just four days after a New York police officer was gunned down in the line of duty. New York police and union leaders immediately called out Tarantino for his unconscionable comments, with union head Patrick Lynch advocating a boycott of his films. We fully support this boycott of Quentin Tarantino films. Hateful rhetoric dehumanizes police and encourages attacks on us. And questioning everything we do threatens public safety by discouraging officers from putting themselves in positions where their legitimate actions could be falsely portrayed as thuggery.

While this statement begins with support for "constructive dialogue about how police

interact with citizens,” that very formulation betrays an imagined dichotomy between “police” and “citizens.” Police need to think of themselves as our fellow citizens. Worse, Lally immediately moves into his own unconstructive dialogue, mischaracterizing what Tarantino said, [launching another ad hominem attack on Tarantino](#), and completely evading the substance of the Rise Up October protest.

Worst of all, Lally reinforces the police-as-victim trope, which is a form of psychological denial. It’s not “inflammatory rhetoric that makes police officers even bigger targets,” its *inflammatory behavior by police officers*. Given the spate of police horrors since 1999, when NY police shot unarmed Amadou Diallo 41 times, it’s fair to wonder why police departments everywhere aren’t showing a whole lot more humility. Instead, the NY chief of police [has given one of the four killers his gun back](#) (after all four were found not guilty by a jury).

Amadou Diallo’s mother, Katiatoo Diallo, was a speaker in the Rise Up October protest. What she said was in [stark and humane contrast to the whining victimhood of the police](#) unions:

We are not bitter. I told the world then, the day when they stood up and told me that the four cops who shot my son had done nothing wrong, that it was the fault of my son, I said to you, I say to you now, I said it then: We need change. Amadou has died. It’s too late for him. But we have to prevent this from happening again. When you have tragedies like that, you need to learn what went wrong and correct it....

Law enforcement community should know that we are not against them. We even feel for those who were shot just recently in Harlem. We are not against them. We are anti-police brutality. We are not anti-cop, because we know some of them are doing good job. But we need to root out those who are brutalizing our children for no reason.

What should a police union be doing, anyway?

The core issue with police unions, teacher unions, and all other public employee unions is how to manage the inherent tension between the good of union members and the good of the public that pays their salaries. Police unions, because their members are empowered to use lethal force, should be especially sensitive to the public perception of what is in the public good. That is almost never going to include killing innocent, unarmed civilians.

In December 2014, NY police union head Lynch actually blamed innocent, unarmed civilians for the [ambush assassination of two police officers](#) by a lone gunman. It was a breath-taking manipulation of reality and defiance of both logic and authority:

[There is blood on many hands tonight](#) — those that incited violence on the streets under the guise of protest, that tried to tear down what New York police officers did every day. That blood on the hands starts on the steps of City Hall, in the office of the mayor....

These comments set the stage for [a symbolic police mutiny](#), as officers turned their backs on New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio at a press conference dealing with the assassination ambush. This is a direct challenge to civil order, open defiance of the mayor’s lawful authority over the police. And it is a gesture of arrogance, not only against non-violent

protests of police killing, but in support of an above-the-law right to continue to execute civilians more or less randomly.

Who is more deserving of protection, police or public?

The same day as the Rise Up October protest, The New York Times ran a front page story about FBI Director James B. Comey telling a Chicago Law School audience that increased scrutiny of police violence have led to an increase in violent crime, a theory for which he admitted he has no data. The data available does not support the claim. But Comey's perception of "a chill wind that has blown through American law enforcement over the last year" is just a more sophisticated whine than the police unions use. For the head of the FBI to defend police officers from scrutiny for their actions, especially their violent or lethal actions, is [little more than a defense of police criminality](#). As the Times reported:

Mr. Comey said that he had been told by many police leaders that officers who would normally stop to question suspicious people are opting to stay in their patrol cars for fear of having their encounters become worldwide video sensations. That hesitancy has led to missed opportunities to apprehend suspects, he said, and has decreased the police presence on the streets of the country's most violent cities.

Wait a minute, that's pure sophistry. If you have police officers afraid of becoming viral video villains, then you have police officers who are tacitly admitting that they are likely to behave illegally if not lethally. Police officers who act properly make boring videos that don't go viral.

The Times did not cover any of the Rise Up October activities. But it did re-publish the FBI chief story on October 30, with the additional comment: "It's not clear why Mr. Comey decided to wade into this issue now."

On October 18, the Times ran a story in the business section based on FBI statistics of police killings. The story notes that the available data strongly shows [pervasive racial bias in many areas of American life](#). Police behavior is no exception:

The data is unequivocal. Police killings are a race problem: African-Americans are being killed disproportionately and by a wide margin.

The same persistent pattern of racial bias in police traffic stops was found in North Carolina statistics, as reported by a long analysis in the Times October 25 - "[The Disproportionate Risk of Driving While Black](#)."

The evidence of racial bias in American life remains powerful and its effects are cruel and unusual. Perhaps the nation is less bigoted than it was in the past, but it remains a long way from being a place where all people are treated equally. And one of the grosser reasons for perpetual racial oppression is [the willingness of powerful police unions to deny reality](#) and blame the victims. Police unions need to reflect on the healing words of Kadiatou Diallo and put aside *their* bitterness. Police unions need to protect and serve the public, not the perpetrators of violence and death.

How about: if you're not careful enough to identify a toy gun in the hands of a child before

you shoot to kill, then you're not careful enough to be an armed police officer. That seems like a pretty low bar.

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