

Inequality and police brutality in New York City

The social underpinnings of the murder of Amadou Diallo

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More than one month has passed since the police killing of Amadou Diallo. The gunning down of this 22-year-old West African immigrant in the doorway of his Bronx home horrified millions in New York City and around the world. The almost daily protests since the shooting are only a pale reflection of the feelings among very broad layers of working people. There is a growing awareness that this incident reveals something deeply sick about social and political life in America's greatest metropolis.

Outrage over the fact that the police officers who killed Diallo have not even been questioned yet has been further fueled by revelations about the conduct of police investigators in the hours immediately following his death. They entered Diallo's home without getting permission from his roommates, ransacking the apartment in an apparent effort to find something which could be used to help justify the shooting. His roommates were questioned for most of the night at the police precinct before finding out that their friend had been killed by the police.

Despite this anger and concern, the official response to the killing shows every sign of following an all-too familiar pattern. There have been expressions of regret from various political leaders. The major newspapers have voiced their editorial concern and urged that steps be taken to "improve" policing and "restore confidence" in the police force. The federal Commission on Civil Rights has announced that it will hold a hearing on the case in May.

In previous cases of police brutality and killings, the headlines have eventually subsided. The fact-finding reports are issued years later--indeed, the federal report on Los Angeles in the wake of the notorious beating of Rodney King almost eight years ago has still not been produced. Very rarely individual police have been prosecuted, sometimes on federal charges after acquittal in state courts, as in the case of the assailants of Rodney King and, more recently, the New York City cop who killed Anthony Baez with an illegal chokehold in 1994.

Even if some punishment is meted out, the brutality continues, and within months another high-profile case emerges, capturing the headlines only because it is particularly gruesome, wanton and unprovoked. New York City now regularly pays out more than \$25 million annually, setting new records each year, to settle civil suits against the police. The official reaction to the killings takes on an almost ritualized character, and no light is shed on the real reasons for these events.

The thinking of the individual cops who pulled the triggers and fired 41 bullets at Diallo, 19 of which found their victim, is the product of broader social processes. A lawyer for these police officers claims that they did not set out to kill an innocent man that night. That makes this incident all the more significant. There is no reason to assume that these were "rogue cops." At any rate it seems clear that there are thousands of others who could have pulled the trigger on an unarmed and wholly innocent man in the same way. What are the conditions that give rise to this?

The 1990s has not been, for a large majority of the population in New York, the golden age of prosperity we read about in the press. Only a thin layer of the population has profited from the continuing bull market on Wall Street.

The unprecedented boom, which has lasted almost the entire decade, has seen the stock market reach new records every year. Rising real estate and stock prices have produced a large number of new millionaires and multimillionaires. There are hundreds of thousands of residents of New York City and the surrounding metropolitan area who enjoy discretionary income beyond their wildest dreams. These are the people whom the *New York Times* addresses in its Sunday real estate section, and most of the rest of that newspaper as well, writing about things like new home bargains in certain neighborhoods going for "only" \$300,000. The average price of a Manhattan apartment is now well over half a million dollars.

There are hundreds of thousands of other New Yorkers who will have difficulty earning a total of half a million dollars in a lifetime. The vast majority of the working population struggle to pay their bills from one paycheck to the next, or are unable to afford the basic necessities of life, including shelter and food. Jobs have become relatively plentiful and the unemployment rate has dropped, although it is still hovers around 8%, significantly above the national average. The jobs, however, are almost all of the low-wage, part-time or temporary variety. The number of working poor, managing without health insurance or going to food banks to feed their families, has grown substantially. Good-paying jobs have disappeared and even better-off working class families require two incomes in order to manage.

This rapidly increasing social polarization is a global trend which finds its sharpest expression in New York. Another phenomenon which has vastly changed the city is immigration. In each of the past two decades, one million immigrants have streamed into New York, and an approximately equal number of mostly native-born residents have moved out. While the population of the city has, according to census figures, grown by a modest amount, the nature of the city has been transformed.

The city is younger and poorer. The school system is beset by crumbling structures and overcrowded classrooms. Workers have come to New York from all over the world fleeing political oppression and economic misery. They are prepared, considering the conditions they left behind, to work for poverty wages, but they have not been given an alternative, or assimilated into an economy in which there are decent jobs. It has been difficult even for those with education or special skills, while the unskilled have only found ways to eke out a living on the fringes of the economy. Immigrant communities have become associated with specific low-wage service sectors. Indians and Pakistanis work at gas stations and as taxi drivers, the Chinese in sweatshops and restaurants, and many of the West Africans, who now number about 100,000 in New York, as street peddlers, like

Amadou Diallo.

These trends--the speculative boom, the disappearance of manufacturing employment, the influx of immigrants used to hold down wages--have all contributed to a rise in poverty and social tension. This is the reality behind the statistics on child poverty released by the Citizens Committee for Children a few weeks ago, including the startling fact that the percentage of children growing up poor has leaped from 39% at the beginning of the 1990s to 52% today.

This social reality has everything to do with the policing of working class neighborhoods and the death of Amadou Diallo. Here is where the social and political issues meet. The methods employed by the New York Police Department are determined by definite social interests. Their tactics flow from the need to defend a thin stratum of the fabulously wealthy and to maintain a business environment acceptable to Wall Street, Madison Avenue and numerous corporate headquarters in a city whose population is overwhelmingly poor and working class. As the gap between the rich and poor has grown, so has the size of the police force expanded. The police are deployed aggressively in Manhattan to make tourists and businesspeople feel safe. Certain "high crime" neighborhoods are targeted for specialized squads such as the Street Crimes Unit.

The police who killed Amadou Diallo were members of this Street Crimes Unit, which quadrupled in size in the last few years, and which has been authorized to use the most aggressive tactics in poor and working class communities around the city. This unit, whose members reportedly have monthly quotas for arrests and seizures of illegal weapons, has become notorious for its arbitrary stop-and-frisk practices directed largely at young blacks and Hispanics.

These police techniques are the product of political decisions. The political representatives of the ruling elite who run the city, state and federal governments have stated quite openly that helping the poor is not the job of government. The job of government, the police force above all, is to smooth the path for business and make the wealthy investors happy.

The ruling class has made use of immigration to increase the supply of labor and hold down wages. At the same time it has conducted an unprecedented assault on public services, in effect forcing workers to pay an increasing share of health care and education costs, and transferring billions of dollars to the wealthy by slashing the welfare rolls and putting thousands of welfare recipients to work at jobs previously performed by city workers.

Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has become the spearhead of this attempt to repeal most of the urban social policy of the 20th century. This so-called moderate, distrusted by sections of the Christian fundamentalist right for his support for abortion rights and refusal to support the impeachment of Clinton, has staked out his own ultra-right wing position, based on an unrelenting law-and-order campaign, a crusade to privatize public services like hospitals and schools, and the demonization of the poor.

Giuliani's "quality of life" campaign has been used for the past five years to portray the most vulnerable sections of the working class as the source of every problem besetting the city. He began by targeting the homeless "squeegeemen" who sought to make a few pennies by cleaning the windshields of cars stopped at red lights. This was the beginning of a nonstop campaign that went on to include taxi drivers, street vendors, and countless other sections of the population. The city's workfare program, by far the largest in the country, has been justified in the most extreme ideological terms, suggesting that the poor have no one but themselves to blame for their poverty, and that society must intervene to correct their behavior by forcing them to work for slave wages.

The budget cuts and attacks on the poor have been accompanied by open attacks on democratic rights. Peaceful protests have been set upon by the police and barriers have been placed around City Hall to make demonstrations impossible.

Although Giuliani has his critics within the political establishment, their voices can barely be heard. Just as the Democratic Party on the national level has adopted the Republican platform with a vengeance, in New York City the Democrats, who predominate on the City Council and in borough offices, have acquiesced in all of Giuliani's major policies. Even those who have reservations about his tactics have no alternative to propose.

There has as yet been no organized response from the working class, which is disenfranchised and abandoned by the union organizations which claim to represent it. Rather than opposing the attacks on democratic rights and living standards, the leaders of the unions have been busy stuffing ballot boxes in union elections and contract votes, as in the case of District Council 37 of AFSCME. Their only concerns have been to safeguard their six-figure salaries and ram through the contract concessions they have negotiated with the Giuliani Administration. Many of them are trying to avoid jail, as the authorities prepare indictments on charges of the theft of millions in union funds.

This is the context in which the police are encouraged and instructed to ride herd on working class communities around the city. The Soundview district of the Bronx, where Amadou Diallo was killed, is not one of the city's most miserable neighborhoods, but it is typical of those areas in which the police have felt entitled to shoot first and ask questions later. The Mayor himself has set the tone for this by ridiculing anyone who raises objections to his provocative actions and expresses concern over the threat to democratic rights.

The most bigoted, corrupt and brutal police officers have been encouraged, but even those without any particular motive along these lines have been trained as a virtual occupying force. Under these conditions, a combination of hostility and hatred of the working class, racism, indifference, fear and panic inevitably leads to incidents such as the one in the Bronx, with four cops emptying their revolvers within seconds, and then finding out that the "suspect" was guilty of nothing.

Black, Hispanic and immigrant workers and youth are the overwhelming majority of the victims of police brutality because they are the overwhelming majority of the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class which are targeted for this campaign of intimidation. Large numbers of the police, programmed to stop and frisk young black men, make no distinction and harass middle class blacks as well, which has only fueled the growing anger against the police force.

It should be clear that the growing social misery and social polarization are behind the dramatic increase in police brutality. Those who defend the system which produces this polarization and misery--even if they recoil from actions such as the killing of Amadou Diallo--are responsible for these inevitable consequences. The fight against police brutality can only be waged as part of an independent political movement of the working class to fight against poverty and inequality.



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