

The Amadou Diallo case: The social and political roots of police violence

The Editorial Board
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The four New York City police officers acquitted February 25 in the shooting death of Amadou Diallo may still face departmental trial and could be removed from the force if it is found that the shooting violated police department guidelines. In addition, Diallo's parents intend to file a civil suit against the police and the city, and the Justice Department announced, through the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, that it would review the case "to determine whether there were any violations of the federal criminal civil rights laws."

Whatever the results of future proceedings, the Albany verdict has its own sinister significance. It has already been interpreted as justification for the virtual police occupation and daily abuse of poor and minority neighborhoods, including the killing of innocent people. In the words of one of the police lawyers, the verdict means "police officers legitimately have to be aggressive in the twinkle of an eye. We pay them to do that as a society. We can't afford to put a hitch in their step. Maybe the jury knew that."

The police serve as defenders of the existing social order in a city characterized by staggering social inequality. While all forms of social spending have been slashed repeatedly over the past 25 years, police ranks have been beefed up to an unprecedented 40,000.

Their central task is to defend the haves against the have-nots in a city where—according to one recent study—the top 20-percent income bracket makes 25 times more than the bottom, and where the nation's largest homeless population walk the same streets as the world's greatest concentration of multi-millionaires.

The firing squad-style killing of Diallo is only the most appalling expression of the effective denial of basic democratic rights to working class and poor people, especially, but not only, the black, Hispanic and

immigrant populations. Under the "stop and frisk" policies implemented by the Street Crime Unit, tens of thousands have been thrown up against the wall and searched, based on suspicions every bit as flimsy as the one that led to the West African immigrant's death.

According to the NYPD's own conservative estimates, 16 black "suspects" were stopped for every arrest made. Cops report that in some neighborhoods youth were subjected to this brutalizing treatment so many times that they would "assume the position" for a search themselves upon seeing a car full of plainclothes police approaching.

The transfer of the trial from the Bronx to Albany added insult to injury: not only do workers face unprovoked police shootings, they are denied the right to serve as jurors after such atrocities.

New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani hailed the acquittal of the cops, and heaped praise on a jury system that had barred the residents he represents from sitting as jurors. "It fills me with profound respect for being an American and for living in a country that has a trial by jury," said Giuliani. Last week, the mayor repeatedly attacked "anti-police prejudice," likening it to racial bigotry or anti-Semitism, and compared New York City cops to "civil rights workers."

Giuliani's opponent in the upcoming contest for US Senator, Hillary Clinton, responded to the verdict in terms nearly identical to those of Giuliani. "We must all work together toward the day when all citizens and all police treat each other with mutual respect," she said, adding, "We must not allow this verdict to divide New Yorkers." While Bill Clinton lists as one of his major accomplishments the hiring of 100,000 more police through federal funds, his wife proposes to add another 50,000 to this number.

In an earlier letter to the Patrolmen's Benevolent

Association, the police union representing the four Street Crime cops, she apologized for having referred to the Diallo shooting as "murder," saying she "clearly misspoke." She went on to declare her support for the death penalty in cases where police officers are killed.

The reaction of many New Yorkers to the verdict was one of stunned disbelief and anger. Hundreds of people gathered spontaneously on the Bronx street where the police shot down the African immigrant a year ago to demonstrate their anger in the hours after the cops were acquitted. Thousands marched down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan on Saturday, ending up at City Hall. Scores were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct and inciting to riot.

Thousands more rallied across the street from the United Nations building on Manhattan's East Side on Sunday in a demonstration called by Al Sharpton's National Action Network. Sharpton, who in recent years has undergone a transformation from racial demagogue to leading black operative in the New York Democratic Party, paraded various politicians before the crowd. Among them was David Dinkins, whose four-year term as mayor saw as many fatal police shootings as have taken place during seven years under Giuliani, and Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel.

The central demands put forward by the Democratic politicians were for a federal civil rights case against the four cops and the establishment of an independent civilian oversight board for the NYPD.

Anyone with illusions that such palliatives will have any more impact than calls by some police "experts" for greater "sensitivity training" for New York City cops need only turn his eyes to Los Angeles. Federal civil rights prosecution, it should be recalled, was the route followed after the four cops who savagely beat black motorist Rodney King in California in 1991 were acquitted in a state trial, which had been moved out of the city to the predominantly white suburb of Simi Valley. That acquittal touched off massive rioting that left more than 50 people dead.

The federal trial, aimed at assuaging the raw emotions provoked by the acquittal, resulted in the conviction of just two of the LA cops, who were both given minimum sentences of 30 months in jail.

As for oversight, Los Angeles has had a civilian Police Commission for years and three years ago created an inspector general's office, charged with

probing issues of police corruption and abuse.

The impact of these initiatives has been nil. This has been made clear as details of a festering scandal in the LAPD continue to leak out. More than 70 cops are reportedly under investigation and the FBI has been called in amid evidence of rampant corruption and brutality, including testimony that an anti-gang unit regularly framed up, beat and even killed innocent people.

Such police scandals are a perennial fact of American life. From the Knapp Commission in the 1970s to the Mollen Commission in the 1990s, revelations of New York City cops acting as criminals while inflicting deadly violence on the populations they supposedly protect emerge with startling regularity.

The enormous social polarization existing in New York City and throughout the United States is incompatible with basic democratic rights. The ruling establishment has no choice but to employ state repression to defend its system and its privileges. That is the message sent out by the verdict in Albany.

Appeals for police reform or Federal court intervention will not change this underlying source of police brutality. That requires the building of a new, independent political movement fighting to unite all working people—black, white, Hispanic and immigrant—in a common struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalist oppression and social misery.



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