

The Los Angeles police scandal and its social roots

Part 3 of a series

Don Knowland, Gerardo Nebbia
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We continue today our series on the scandal in the Los Angeles Police Department. Part 1 appeared on Monday, March 13; part 2 on Tuesday, March 14. The fourth and concluding installment will be published tomorrow.

On April 24, 1992 minority working class areas of Los Angeles exploded against the mockery of the Simi Valley criminal trial against the police that beat Rodney King, and the Los Angeles Police Department's long history of abuses. The riot would become one of the worse in US history, producing more casualties, 54 dead and 2,000 injured, than any civil unrest since the Civil War.

Following the riots, 2,000 National Guard troops occupied south central Los Angeles, Pico-Union in the Rampart area, Pomona and other impoverished riot-torn areas. Before they left nine people had been killed. To many in these communities it feels as if an occupying army never left.

Before the riots the Christopher Commission had called for closer supervision and tracking of officers, plus stricter hiring and training procedures. In the wake of the riots the city purported to begin to implement the kinds of reforms called for by the Commission's report. Hard-line police chief Darryl Gates was removed, and a black police chief installed from outside the department, Willie Williams, with the claim that this would open the way to "reform" of the LAPD. Complaint procedures were supposedly made citizen-friendly. Eventually a program of "community policing" was undertaken to present a kinder, gentler face to the poor and working class communities.

The Rampart abuses disclosed by Rafael Perez show that despite all the talk about reforms being implemented, it remained business as usual at the LAPD. If anything, the abuses by police officers have grown more flagrant and violent in the decade after the Rodney King beating. This cannot be attributed to inadequate training, or to the presence of "a few bad cops" sprinkled amongst the sea of overwhelmingly law-abiding officers, or explained by any of the other platitudes that have been trundled out by official spokesmen and the media. Nor, of course, is it something peculiar to Los Angeles.

Underlying the continued and widespread police brutality

reflected in the LAPD and across the United States has been a protracted political assault on the democratic rights of the working class in the guise of "getting tough" on crime. This campaign went hand in hand with an economic assault on workers' living standards and social conditions.

The get-tough-on-crime message started during the administration of President Richard Nixon, through the mouths of future convicted criminals such as Vice President Spiro Agnew and Attorney General John Mitchell, among others. "Law-and-order" demagoguery featured calls for undoing the "activist" legacy of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren in the 1950s and 1960s. The Warren court decisions had represented an important expansion of the constitutional protection afforded to arrested persons, such as warnings to criminal suspects that they had rights to speak to counsel before being interrogated by police, and the right of indigents to a defense attorney at state expense.

The Reagan administration in the 1980s gave the broadest sweep to these attacks on democratic rights. Appointment of right-wing judges was followed by the dismantling or watering down of many procedural safeguards in criminal cases. The so-called war on drugs provided a pretext for this clampdown, although it appears that the Reagan Administration itself, as a way of illegally funding the Contra war against the Nicaraguan government, helped to trigger the crack cocaine epidemic in Los Angeles.

The campaign against individual constitutional rights resonated from the United States Supreme Court on high, down through appellate courts to local trial judges, prosecutors and police on the beat. The justice system tilted sharply in favor of prosecutors and police.

Politicians foisted proposition after proposition onto the California ballot to increase criminal penalties and eliminate procedural safeguards. An example is Proposition 15, passed in 1990 to permit the introduction of hearsay testimony from police officers about what other officers had written in incident reports at preliminary hearings, where judges determine whether there is sufficient evidence to bind a defendant over to stand trial. This effectively eliminated the longstanding right of

defense attorneys to conduct cross-examination of a hostile witness. Once bound over for trial, it was the rare defendant who was likely to chance conviction at trial.

Grossly excessive sentences for even minor crimes were required, eliminating much of a judge's discretion to tailor a sentence to the circumstances in a particular case. This inevitably debased the plea bargaining system. Even an innocent person has no choice but to plead guilty to possession of a small quantity of drugs or other lesser offense and accept a lesser sentence, rather than face the alternative of as much as 25 years to life, mandatory if the offense is a "third strike" in California.

In Los Angeles, prosecutors routinely relied on perjured police testimony to obtain convictions. There are credible allegations that they knew what the CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) cops were doing and did nothing to stop it. Judges turned a blind eye when defendants were convicted through suspect or perjured police testimony. Most new judges appointed and hearing criminal cases were themselves former prosecutors, strongly inclined against enforcing constitutional protections. In this political and legal environment it is hardly surprising that police officers believed they could get away with wholesale violation of rights without anyone in the power structure so much as blinking an eye.

The attack on democratic rights and buildup of police powers in the United States is directly related to the intensification of social tensions and the growing economic polarization. Since the late 1970s, with the end of the post-World War II boom, the ruling class and its political representatives launched attacks on the working class and its living standards in the form of union-busting, layoffs, speedups and severe cutbacks in social programs.

This assault on living conditions found its most brutal expression in the inner cities. In Los Angeles, south central and east LA faced the closure of industrial plants and consequent elimination of thousands of skilled jobs. Unemployment markedly increased, as did poverty, substandard housing, and cutbacks in basic governmental services. Schools became dilapidated, overcrowded and underfunded. Drug abuse, particularly rock cocaine, skyrocketed in many of these areas, as did wholesale prosecutions and jailings under the banner of the war on drugs.

Working class communities and youth were to be intimidated and criminalized. It was convenient to lump together all young men in neighborhoods, characterizing them as drug-selling gang members, the enemy. The LAPD implemented massive "gang sweeps" to harass hundreds of working class youth at a time, without regard to any evidence of individual criminal activity. The LAPD occupying army became a law unto itself.

It became a common sight in working class areas in the 1990s to see youth roused on sidewalks by the LAPD, on their knees and with their hands behind their heads simply because of who they were. More recently, the district attorney's office obtained

injunctions in court precluding youth suspected as gang members from congregating or even calling each other on beepers, in violation of constitutional rights to freedom of association.

It has now been revealed by disaffected INS officers that the FBI, in conjunction with Rampart CRASH and the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service), maintained a database of 10,000 to 15,000 persons it claimed were associated with the Rampart area 18th Street gang. This preposterous number effectively amounts to criminalizing most of the teenage male population of the Rampart area. All such persons become fair game for harassment and deportation.

Despite the financial boom, economic and social conditions are as bad or worse in inner city Los Angeles than they were in 1992, at the time of the riots. In spite of the creation of thousands of high-tech and movie industry jobs, Los Angeles is still some 200,000 jobs short of its 1990 totals. At about 8 percent, the official Los Angeles city unemployment rate is even higher than the California average of 6.4 percent. The so-called boom has only worsened living conditions for most working families and poor.

Prosperity has been accompanied by what is being called the *juvenation of poverty* in every inner city. In California youth poverty doubled (from 11 percent to 23 percent of youth) in the 80s. In Los Angeles it reached an astonishing 40 percent.

Rents and other living costs markedly increased, while wages did not. While some of the state's bulging tax revenues recently have been directed at funding public schools, following an outcry over wholesale educational failure, cutbacks in social services such as health care have not been significantly restored.

Thus, if anything, the riots and the subsequent "recovery" provided an impetus for further police terror. Unable to make good on flimsy promises of reconstruction and development, the ruling class delivered instead even more of the old abuse. The illusion of reform in the wake of the Christopher Commission became a smokescreen for continuing brutality.

The persistence and pervasiveness of police abuse in Los Angeles, and the country as a whole, necessarily reflects economic and social conditions—the highly polarized and violent state of class relations. Police abuse is plainly an objective social phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the socioeconomic structure, politics and official ideology of America at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To be continued



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