

SEP (US) statement: New strategy needed to fight police violence and racism

Socialist Equality Party
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The following SEP statement was distributed at the June 2 rally in Cincinnati held to protest police violence.

Police violence is a scourge not only in Cincinnati, but across the US. Timothy Thomas is one of scores of mainly minority workers and youth in New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Pittsburgh and other cities who have fallen victim to police bullets and billy clubs in recent years. The national and chronic scope of this problem demonstrates that it is not—as the politicians, the media and the civil rights establishment maintain—a matter of a “few bad apples” among the police, but rather is deeply rooted in the character and structure of American society.

An understanding of the objective economic and social roots of police brutality and racial profiling is a precondition for the waging of an effective struggle against these evils.

The eruption that followed the killing of Thomas was itself an expression of the most important fact about American life—something that is never mentioned by the media, the politicians, the preachers or those who administer the schools. That fact is the staggering growth of social and economic inequality in the US. The rioting that shook Cincinnati reflected, on a limited and localized scale, the explosive social divisions and tensions that lie just below the surface of everyday life in America.

The events in Cincinnati echoed the ghetto upheavals of the 1960s and the 1992 Los Angeles riot. But this latest eruption occurred at the end of a decade of unprecedented economic growth, when the whole country was supposedly enjoying the fruits of prosperity. Cincinnati stripped away this false picture of America and revealed that the much-vaunted prosperity has overwhelmingly benefited the richest 5 or 10 percent, while most workers have barely managed to hang on, and the most impoverished sections have seen their conditions worsen.

Unlike earlier periods in the US when economic expansion helped narrow the gap between the privileged elite and the rest of the population, the opposite has occurred over the past decade.

The grossly unequal distribution of the benefits of economic growth demonstrates the organic inability of the present economic and social order—the capitalist profit system—to address the needs of the general population and provide decent-

paying and secure jobs, health care, education and housing for all. Instead, not just Cincinnati, but cities throughout the country have witnessed deteriorating public services and a rise in malnutrition, infant mortality, homelessness and other social evils.

All this took place with a Democrat in the White House. The Clinton administration embodied the Democratic Party's lurch to the right in lock step with the Republicans, its abandonment of any program of social reforms and its embrace of the cut-throat, anti-social policies dictated by big business. The Clinton years will be remembered for the elimination of the welfare entitlement, the growth of the homeless population, and the swelling of the ranks of the uninsured, on the one hand, and the tripling of the number of millionaires in America, on the other.

Two basic political facts must inform any struggle against police repression and racism. First is the incapacity of American capitalism to address, let alone resolve, the social needs of the masses of working people. Second is the inability of the Democratic Party—despite its claims to represent working people and minorities—to offer any progressive solution to the social ills that plague America, or mount any resistance to the right-wing program of the Republicans.

Cincinnati reveals the process of class polarization occurring in every city. The economic disparity between the richest 5 percent in the Cincinnati metropolitan area and the poorest 5 percent is second only to the Tampa Bay region, the worst in the country.

Over the last decade locally-based Fortune 500 companies—Kroger, Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores—made record profits, allowing corporate CEOs, big investors and the most affluent layers of the middle class to enrich themselves. At the other pole of society, thousands of poor people, cut off from welfare, have been forced to rely on low-paying temporary jobs and homeless shelters to survive.

The city's Democratic-controlled administration has bent over backwards to meet the demands of big business, providing tax breaks and other incentives for the rich, while spending nearly \$1 billion for new sports stadiums and other downtown development. A part of this policy is the gentrification of the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood—the poorest in the city—where officials have encouraged real estate developers and venture

capitalists to buy up cheap land and buildings and transform them into dot.com start-ups and upscale lofts and townhouses.

At the same time public housing for low-income families has been bulldozed and the Cincinnati police have been authorized by city officials to function as a virtual private security force to rid Over-the-Rhine of “undesirables,” i.e., panhandlers, homeless people and minority youth.

Police repression in Cincinnati and throughout the US is not an accident or simply the product of racist cops. The more naked the rule of the financial oligarchy, the more obvious the disparity between the wealth of the elite and the rations left for the rest of the country, the more the powers-that-be are obliged to rely on brute force and terror to keep the masses down. These social realities render all talk about ending police brutality by means of citizen review boards, sensitivity and diversity training of the cops, and the further integration of police forces nothing more than illusions and political diversions.

The same is true for the perspective of electing more black mayors and city officials and promoting minority-owned businesses through affirmative action set-asides. What has this strategy, which has been pursued for nearly three decades, produced for the vast majority of African Americans? Conditions for most black workers and youth have deteriorated, while the overwhelming benefit of this policy has gone to elite blacks like the multimillionaire Jesse Jackson. These black politicians and so-called civil rights leaders seek to divert the anger over police killings in such a way as to advance their own agenda for more government contracts and more wealth. They do not speak for the masses of workers or youth of any color.

The politics of race and ethnic identity is a deception and a dead end. It plays into the hands of racist and right-wing forces who want to divide and weaken the working class.

Black, white and immigrant workers can and must be united. The objective conditions for overcoming divisions in the working class are present.

The eruption in Cincinnati is but a glimpse of the social discontent that is growing against corporate downsizing, the gutting of social programs and attacks on democratic rights. As the economic downturn worsens, workers who lose their jobs will discover that the social safety net has been eliminated. The working class will be driven into a confrontation with the Bush administration—a government that came to power through fraud, judicial fiat and the suppression of voting rights.

The best defense of democratic rights is an active, organized and vigilant working class movement. What ultimately put an end to the industrial despotism on the factory floor in the 1930s was the mass struggle of the working class to build the industrial unions. The scourge of lynching and Jim Crow segregation was only ended when blacks and their allies built the mass civil rights movement of the 1960s.

A new mass movement of the working class, however, must

not be trapped—as these earlier movements were—within the confines of the Democratic Party and the profit system. Insofar as workers are tied to the Democrats, a big business party, they are incapable of advancing an effective program to defend their interests.

Police brutality and racism are rooted in the undemocratic and exploitative character of capitalism itself, in which society's resources and decision-making powers are monopolized by the bankers and corporate bosses. The struggle against police violence and racism, and for genuine democracy and equality, can be taken forward only through the building of an independent political party of the working class that will attack inequality at its very foundation.

What is the way forward in the fight against police violence and racial profiling? To start with, there must be an insistence on the prosecution to the fullest extent of the law of all policemen involved in such attacks. But even the realization of this basic demand requires the construction of an independent political movement of the working class, because the powers-that-be cannot be trusted to discipline their own armed lieutenants.

The new party of the working class will advance a socialist program to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars to rebuild the cities, guarantee decent paying jobs, education and training, and provide health care and high-quality housing for all. Instead of squandering society's resources on tax breaks and other handouts to the rich, these resources will be utilized to abolish poverty and lift the economic and cultural level of the masses of working people.

The primary task facing the working class, and above all the young generation, is the building of a new leadership that will unite all working people to fight for this democratic, revolutionary and socialist perspective.



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