

Democrats call for deployment of National Guard in Chicago

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Last week, two Illinois state representatives, John Fritchey and LaShawn Ford, both Democrats from the Chicago area, called on Governor Pat Quinn and Mayor Richard Daley to deploy the National Guard in the US city's western and southern neighborhoods.

The state Democrats pointed to the deaths of 113 people, mostly African Americans, in street violence since the beginning of the year to justify their call to send in military troops. Such an action has nothing to do with stopping crime, however, which is the product of mass unemployment and poverty and the dismantling of public education in the city.

Crime is being used as a pretext to employ state violence and intimidation against the working class population of the city. If it were to occur, the dispatch of troops in America's third largest city would mark a new and ominous stage in the decay of US democracy.

Well aware that popular anger and class tensions are reaching a breaking point in Chicago—where the gap between the wealthy elite and the masses of working and poor people has never been larger—the proposal to dispatch the National Guard is part of an ongoing debate within the political establishment on how to best deal with potential “civil unrest.”

Like the anti-immigrant law in Arizona, the call for the National Guard is being used as a trial balloon nationally, in order to shift the debate further to the right, undermine constitutional prohibitions against the use of the military for domestic policing and legitimize the widespread use of troops in the cities for the first time since the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s.

In their remarks, Fritchey and Ford explicitly compared Chicago to Iraq and Afghanistan where military troops are being used to crush popular resistance to the US occupations.

“As we speak,” Fritchey, a former assistant attorney

general, said, “National Guard members are working side-by-side with our troops to fight a war halfway around the world. The unfortunate reality is that we have another war that is just as deadly taking place right in our backyard.”

Ford, a black legislator who promotes himself as a defender of “social justice,” said, “US troops have been winning the hearts and minds (of people) in Iraq. They've stabilized those communities. They made those communities much better. Now those communities are safe. That's what we want right here in Illinois, for the National Guard to come in and stabilize these communities.”

In an effort to downplay the attack on democratic rights, Ford continued, “We're not talking about rolling tanks down the street... We're talking about individuals, men and woman that have been specifically trained to assist law enforcement and, assist with civil unrest.”

The lack of any principled opposition to the proposal is a measure of the decay of democracy in America and the absence of any serious commitment to basic constitutional protections by the Democratic Party and liberal establishment.

Mayor Daley indicated he was “open to suggestions” but said he would need to exercise “caution” in the short term. Governor Quinn—whose predecessor, ousted Governor Rod Blagojevich, had made a similar proposal to dispatch the National Guard in 2008—worried that that troops might “step on the toes” of Chicago police. He deferred the decision to Daley, indicating he'd be open to help the city with “intelligence or aerial surveillance.”

For their own reasons, the most vocal opposition came from the Chicago Police Department and the city's major daily, the *Chicago Tribune*, two

institutions that hardly have a record of defending democratic rights.

Asserting that the police department—if armed with sufficient military-style weaponry and enough manpower for summer-long “strategic response teams”—could do a better job, Police Superintendent Jody Weis criticized the proposal, insisting that local cops did not want troops stepping on their territory.

Weis warned that soldiers raiding homes without warrants and breaking down the doors of local residents could itself incite popular resistance. Alluding to the 1970 Kent State University incident, where the National Guard murdered four protesting college students, Weis said having guardsmen handle crime could be “disastrous.”

Nevertheless, the police chief said if Daley suggested it, he would consider the option and could see a possible limited role for the National Guard in specialized fields, such as intelligence analysis and helicopter support.

The conservative *Chicago Tribune* criticized the “political grandstanding” by the Democratic representatives, but nevertheless called it a “sincere call for help.” It stated that the budget crisis makes a “federally funded option like the National Guard appealing to local lawmakers.” However, the *Tribune* called it a “brash proposal,” saying the “national guard’s record of suppressing civil unrest ranges from spotty to—quoting Supt. Weis—‘disastrous.’”

President Obama, a former Illinois state senator from Chicago, issued no statements on the matter.

Over the past several years, violence in city streets have taken a tragic toll. But this is the direct result of policies pursued by the Democratic Party, which has gutted public education, housing and other essential social services, while providing tax breaks and other benefits to the city’s wealthy elite.

Over the last three decades, Chicago has become a major center of financial speculation and real estate development while hundreds of thousands of working people have seen their jobs and living standards destroyed through the dismantling of basic industry.

While Chicago’s official unemployment rate stands at 11.2 percent, up from 9.4 percent last March, this is a gross underestimation of the real situation. A recent report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at

Northeastern University revealed that 51 percent of teenagers in their first year out of high school, who have not gone on to higher education, are currently unemployed. For African-American teenagers, that same unemployment rate stands at 85 percent.

In November 2009, a *Chicago Reporter* study of the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey polled unemployment rates for the south side neighborhoods of Auburn, Gresham, Englewood and Washington Heights—four of the neighborhoods hit hardest by violence over the last four months—and declared their PUMA (public use microdata area) unemployment rate to be the second highest in the nation at 28.5 percent, just behind a north eastside neighborhood in Detroit.

As of February 2010, over 30 percent of the children in Chicago are living in poverty. The Chicago Public School (CPS) system announced at the beginning of this year that it was closing at least 14 of its schools and, in some cases, replacing them with privately run charter schools.

Former CPS CEO Arne Duncan—now Obama’s Secretary of Education—directly contributed to the growth of violence. One plan, released in 2004, set out to close 20 of 22 public schools in one region of the city over a four-year period in order to replace them with privately run charter schools. The dislocation brought on by school closings has contributed to the surge in violence.

The corporate elite in Chicago and nationally has no response to this growing social crisis but increased repression. This is the significance of the proposal to bring in the National Guard.

It is worth nothing that the first use of the Illinois National Guard in Chicago was in 1878—when armories were built just outside of the city—as a response to the great railroad strike of 1877. The last time the National Guard was deployed in Illinois was in 1968, when Mayor Richard J. Daley (father of the current mayor) deployed troops to brutally put down the antiwar protests outside of the Democratic National Convention.



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