

State of Emergency declared in Chester, Pennsylvania

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In a measure generally reserved for riots, major disasters or the establishment of a police state in underdeveloped countries, the mayor of Chester, Pennsylvania, declared a state of emergency on June 19.

Black Republican Mayor Wendell Butler, Jr., announced the implementation of a curfew, a restriction on the right to assemble and increased police activity following the fourth homicide within eight days. It may be the first use of a city's murder rate to justify the suspension of the civil rights of large sections of the population.

Chester is an impoverished small city just south of Philadelphia on the East Coast of the US. Like so many formerly industrialized towns, it is characterized by high unemployment, blighted neighborhoods, failing schools, drugs and crime.

The apparent drug-related shooting by hooded gunmen of a 2-year-old child in his father's arms became the emotional fuel used by the media to call for new anti-crime measures. Chester's murder rate, while horrific, is still on par with last year, when 20 homicides were reported.

Under the state of emergency anyone within five designated high-crime areas are subject to a 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew unless they can demonstrate a "legitimate reason." It also forbids outside gatherings of three or more people without a permit during that time period. The police have been placed on 12-hour patrols, all police vacations are cancelled, and state and county police have been brought in to enforce the ordinance.

The mayor had the right to impose the emergency decree for five days under the city charter. The city council extended the measure another 30 days in a

unanimous vote by both Democrats and Republicans in the city government.

After 10 days of reported calm, 100 police (including police from other districts, state police and a SWAT team) descended on a house after a burglary was reported to be in progress in the afternoon on June 29. What appears to be a massive shootout by the police then took place, with the police killing the 16-year-old alleged robber and injuring his companion. A policeman, who was part of the backup team, was shot, as well as a fourth person believed to be in the garage where the robbery was to have taken place.

Residents reported hearing dozens of shots in the course of the exchange. Proof of the high volume of the police shooting came in the report by the county medical examiner of the dead youth, Andre Morales. According to the report, Morales died of multiple gunshot wounds inflicted by the police.

The injured, alleged companion of the youth who was killed by the police, Shaquille Byrd, has been charged with the murder of Morales, since his death occurred during the commission of an assumed felony.

Even before the police shooting, residents had complained of heavy-handed police activity. Stefan Roots, a blogger for the *Delco Daily Times*, said people have been stopped outside of the target areas, and that four young men leaving a job fair in the afternoon were thrown against a wall and told only three people could be together. He also reported that a 70-year-old man was pulled from his car by police with guns drawn, and only released when they noticed his age.

"One friend told me he was run off the road one block from his home, told to lie on the street, and spent the night in jail. All charges were later dropped," stated Roots in a blog entry.

Residents said they were stopped and questioned

while trying to walk to convenience stores, according to the *New York Times*. Families at barbecues were told to put their coals out as the curfew hour approached.

Many residents believe the real reason for the state of emergency is the \$500 million “revitalization plan” that included the opening of a major league soccer stadium on the city’s riverfront.

The new stadium, called PPL Park, is home to the Philadelphia Union soccer league. The team held its first game on June 28, one week after the announcement of the state of emergency.

“I believe the reasons for the emergency have to do with the new stadium,” a resident told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This has been going on for years, including the shooting of children. But with the stadium and other businesses they are trying to bring into the city they have to look like they are doing something.”

She continued, “There are not many jobs, and if you have a record it is almost impossible to get employment,” she said. “There is only one recreation center, and that’s in one of the projects, and one pool. So what are kids supposed to do?”

Tajh Eshaad, 27, told the *Times*, “We’ve got a casino, a prison and now a stadium. But we don’t have a recreation center or even a McDonald’s in this city.”

Chester was also the scene of a previous police-state operation 11 years ago. In May 1999, a special operations unit carried out three mock military exercises in two vacant federal housing complexes that were to be demolished and rebuilt. Without the knowledge of the neighbors or the housing director, troops from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, descended into the neighborhoods to test urban counter-terrorism techniques using explosives, blowing in doors, utilizing automatic weapons and helicopters.

At the time, Army Special Operations spokesman Walter Sokalski told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that Chester was chosen for the military dress rehearsal because of a “high degree of cooperation from local officials.” One of those officials is the former chief of police and the present mayor, Wendell Butler, Jr.

Chester is located between Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Wilmington, Delaware, and was, famously, the site of William Penn’s initial landing in 1682. The proud city and its naval shipyard supplied the Union during the Civil War, and was the largest post-bellum shipyard in the country. Chester continued

as the nation’s premier shipyard until after World War II.

The city boasted industrial facilities, Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock, and factories including Ford Motor Co. and Scott Paper, with additional manufacturing nearby—Marcus Hook refineries, Phoenix Steel and Boeing. Chester’s population peaked in 1950 at 66,000. Between 1950 and 1980 Chester lost 32 percent of its jobs and half the population. As of 2000, the city’s population had receded to the 1910 level, having lost an additional 10,000 residents within eight years.

Chester’s poverty rate is now nearly 30 percent, with at least 40 percent of the children under the poverty level. In 2000, Chester’s schools ranked last in the state’s 501 districts.

The ongoing use of police-state measures in Chester represents a warning over the fragility of democratic rights in the US. While workers are appalled at the crime and murder rate that plagues their neighborhoods, the government has no intention of addressing these concerns. In its place they are promoting anti-democratic measures as the answer.



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