In wake of British riots, New York police prepare for unrest

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New York police anti-riot units assembled last week at a training facility on Randall's Island to prepare for an outbreak of civil unrest similar to those that have occurred recently in Britain.

The August 12 "mobilization exercises" brought together police from all five of the city's boroughs, including specialized units such as mounted police and aviation.

The riot training was held just days after the New York City Police Department (NYPD) announced the formation of a new "juvenile justice unit," which is to include detachments of cops assigned to troll Internet social media sites like Facebook and Twitter in search of any indication of impending disturbances.

During and after the British riots, police and politicians have launched a hysterical witch-hunt against social media, blaming its use for the spread of unrest across the country. Police have admitted that they contemplated shutting down Twitter and other sites and are still considering the use of such measures against any future disturbances.

A British court this week sentenced two young men to four years in prison for material they posted on Facebook dealing with the riots, although there is no evidence that their online activities had any connection to or resulted in any criminal actions.

The British riots were triggered by a police attack on a peaceful protest against the August 4 police shooting death of Mark Duggan, 29.

The British government and media have incessantly argued that the riots cannot be attributed to social conditions, but rather are the product of the moral failings—lack of responsibility, greed, etc.—of those involved.

The training mobilization of the NYPD, however, makes it more than clear that the ruling elite on the other side of the Atlantic is quite conscious that the conditions of social inequality, poverty, police abuse and attacks on social services and conditions that exist in both Britain and America can trigger an explosion in New York City.

In terms of income distribution, New York City, the capital of the US financial sector, is the most unequal major city in the US and is among the most unequal cities in the world. According to recent figures, the city's top 1 percent monopolizes 44 percent of income. The city's boundaries encompass both Wall Street, where top executives rake in salaries and bonuses amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, and the Bronx, the poorest county in the country. If it were a country, New York City would be one of the most unequal in the world, ranking between Chile and Honduras.

Sitting atop this social powder-keg is Mayor Michael Bloomberg, one of the richest of New York City's 58 billionaires.

While Bloomberg as well as New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo have carried out drastic cuts in social programs, and city payrolls are shrinking as thousands of jobs are eliminated by means of layoffs and attrition, one area spared the budget ax has been the NYPD. Its total reduction in spending in the mayor's budget amounted to less than 1 percent. Last month, the city hired another 1,400 new cops into its Police Academy, which will swell police ranks to over 35,000.

This massive force has been deployed in the city's working class and poor neighborhoods, where young people, the great majority of them black and Hispanic, are subjected to continuous harassment. Last year, the NYPD broke its previous record, stopping and frisking a total of over 600,000 people, nearly 90 percent of whom were neither arrested nor charged with any

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offense. During the first quarter of this year, cops stopped and frisked over 183,000 people, putting the NYPD on track to break the 700,000 mark for the year as a whole.

In recent months, New York police have acted with increasing provocation in enforcing the “zero tolerance” principles first introduced under former Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, who has been contracted by Britain’s Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron as a consultant on policing in wake of the riots.

On July 28, dozens of police attacked a group of Uruguayan football fans in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, who were celebrating their national team’s victory in the Copa America. Police responded to the peaceful crowd with random arrests, clubbings and the ripping down of Uruguay flags. A number of people were injured in the police action, including young girl whose leg was broken as cops pushed back the crowd.

And on June 28, police broke up an album-release party organized by the rap group Smif-N-Wessun at a night club on the Lower East Side, severely beating and arresting a number of those in attendance.

The combination of stark social inequality, depression-level unemployment in many city neighborhoods, ever-escalating budget cuts and relentless police harassment are creating the conditions for a social eruption in America’s largest city.

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