

Rodney King: An individual and social tragedy

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Shortly before dawn last Sunday morning, Rodney King, aged 47, was found dead at the bottom of his pool. According to neighbors he was an avid swimmer and it was not unusual for him to swim at night. This night however, neighbors heard King sobbing outside in the hours before his death.

King died a little more than 20 years after he was savagely beaten by the Los Angeles Police Department. That incident transformed him into an international symbol of police brutality. His life took on this significance through no particular desire on his part and over the years he never seemed comfortable with it.

There was nothing out of the ordinary on March 2, 1991, when four policemen kicked King and beat him with their clubs, and another 23 “law enforcement” officers stood by, observing and encouraging the assault. The only difference from routine police violence was that this time, the police were caught on camera. As that footage was broadcast on the news, workers across the country recognized that the brazen criminality of two dozen police could not be dismissed as an isolated incident.

As the *Bulletin*, the predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote at the time: “When 27 cops gather on a Los Angeles street corner, in full public view, to make sport of beating a man to within inches of death, they are not acting as ‘individuals.’ They are the representatives of a society on the brink of breakdown, where the relations between people have descended to the level of the animal kingdom. They personify a dehumanized society whose ruling class they are hired to defend.”

When the four policeman who attacked King were acquitted one year later, on April 29, 1992, the verdict sparked a social explosion. The rioting that swept Los Angeles was an expression of anger at the basic social

conditions of pervasive poverty, racism and police brutality. Over the course of six days, nearly 4,000 soldiers were deployed to Los Angeles to suppress the riot, and when the dust settled, more than 15,000 people had been arrested, 2,000 injured, and 54 killed.

During the riots, King famously called for peace in a televised statement asking, “Can we all get along?” But the riots were based on a social crisis that ran far deeper than King’s personal tragedy. The previous decade had seen the destruction of 70,000 manufacturing jobs in the Los Angeles area. During the recession of 1990-91, this steady decline in jobs accelerated. Los Angeles County lost 400,000 jobs in the aerospace industry alone during that recession. This shift reflected American capitalism’s declining position internationally.

Moreover, the attempts of the federal government to placate the working class under President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” were steadily being replaced with efforts to break it under the Reagan administration’s “War on Drugs.” Between Reagan’s election in 1980 and the riots, nearly 12 years later, the incarceration rate had more than doubled.

While Johnson had enough confidence in the American economy to promise a better life to workers and pay for a vicious imperialist war in Vietnam, future president Bill Clinton could only express pessimism during his 1992 campaign, saying, “We’re never going to have enough money or enough wisdom to solve all these problems.” By the time of the Rodney King riots, the ruling elites had finished their experiments in social programs and had moved on to their demands for “law and order.”

And how do things stand now? Nearly 20 percent of Los Angeles residents live below the poverty line. The unemployment rate in the city is 11 percent, well above

the 8.7 percent it was just before the riots, and each month thousands more lose their unemployment benefits. Nationwide, the number of people behind bars has more than doubled. Over 7 million Americans are locked up or on probation or parole.

Police brutality certainly hasn't declined. Since King's beating, the Rampart scandal in Los Angeles exposed the continuing corruption. More recently there was the 2011 case of Kelly Thomas. Thomas was an unarmed homeless man with mental health issues who was beaten to death by two police in Fullerton, a Los Angeles suburb, as four other cops watched. In short, none of the underlying issues have been resolved.

The only noticeable change is that police, forewarned by the Rodney King exposure, go to great lengths to insure they are not being recorded or videotaped when they attack and brutalize people. Individuals attempting to record or film the police in action are routinely arrested and their recording devices confiscated or destroyed. Some states and local governments, like Cook County, Illinois, have sought to make it illegal to record the police unless they give their consent first.

King's life since the riots continued to reflect the ongoing social crisis in LA. After eventually settling a civil suit against the city for \$3.8 million, he lost much of it in a failed business. He continued to struggle with alcoholism and various drug addictions and had several further encounters with the police, most often for driving under the influence.

Like many Americans, he had difficulty finding work. He had to string together his mortgage payments out of part-time construction work and selling his celebrity. He appeared on a reality TV show, "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew," to deal with his addictions.

Even more degrading was his celebrity boxing match against an ex-cop from Pennsylvania, Simon Aouad. Although King won the match, the promoters billed it as a chance for justice in the ring. In a particularly tasteless moment of pre-match bravado, Aouad said he would give King a beating that's "going to make him think the Los Angeles Police Department were simply playing footsies."

With no hope of a regular job, and no public treatment for his addictions available, there was no real path forward for King. Money and treatment came only at the cost of reliving and publicizing the night he was nearly killed. In a way his life embodied the dead-

end confronting workers and youth under capitalism. The social crisis in America presents itself through individual tragedy and poverty, in addition to broader indicators like unemployment, but there is no individual solution to these social problems.



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