

# Social inequality fuels anger over police killing of St. Louis youth

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St. Louis County police shot and critically wounded a 19-year-old man Wednesday morning, as authorities escalated the crackdown on the protests that have erupted over the August 9 police killing of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. This latest killing came as hundreds of state and local paramilitary forces, armed with modern urban warfare weaponry, continued their occupation of the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson.

Local authorities are collaborating with the NAACP, Reverend Al Sharpton and other Democratic Party-affiliated forces to placate the anger of residents by promising that the Obama administration, the FBI and the US Justice Department will carry out a full investigation of Brown's killing. For its part, the Ferguson Police Department continues to obstruct any investigation, refusing to release the name of the police officer who shot Brown "like an animal," according to an eyewitness.

St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley, a black Democratic politician, urged residents to "stay calm," saying he had "received a communication from the White House today, letting me know that the president is monitoring the situation, and will provide whatever necessary assistance that we believe will be necessary."

The White House is indeed closely monitoring the situation and fully supports the violent repression by police. Rejecting any government measures to alleviate chronic mass unemployment and poverty in cities like St. Louis—where one out of every four residents lives in poverty—the Obama administration has supplied local police departments with US military weaponry from Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones.

As for the US Justice Department, it has an unbroken record of covering up one crime after another, from government torture, drone assassinations and domestic spying, to police killings and financial criminality in

the US.

As officials call for "calm" over the cold-blooded actions of the police, measures are being taken to ratchet up state repression. Ferguson Mayor James Knowles III and the City Council issued a statement demanding that "any groups wishing to assemble in prayer or protest to do so only during daylight hours in an organized and respectful manner" and to disperse "well before the evening hours to ensure the safety of the participants and community."

Local authorities and the media have largely exaggerated the isolated incidents of store break-ins and vandalism in order to label the protesters as criminals, carry out dozens of arrests and terrorize an entire working class neighborhood. With great fanfare, police have announced that nine "looters" will face various felony charges relating to burglary and theft.

Coming after a string of police killings throughout the country, the murder of Michael Brown has provoked widespread revulsion among workers of all races. The continued protests, in the face of a police crackdown, are an indication of seething social tensions in St. Louis and throughout the United States.

"I was not shocked by the reaction of the people," said Mark Rank, a professor at George Washington University in St. Louis, who studies poverty and social inequality. "There are a lot of tensions and it took something like this to spark them," he told the WSWs.

Professor Rank said the city was among the most racially segregated in the country, the result of deliberate policies by real estate interests and the political establishment. Many years ago, he said, both African American and white workers had attained a decent standard of living in the heavily unionized manufacturing industries, lessening levels of poverty and inequality.

However, like Rust Belt cities across the US, Professor Rank said, “deindustrialization has hollowed out the city and eliminated job opportunities. This has been devastating. Now, if you can find a job at all, it will be low-paying and without benefits, and you will not be able to support a family.”

In St. Louis, which was once a major center for railroads, trucking, breweries, auto and aerospace, the destruction of the city’s industrial base has led to a loss of nearly two-thirds of its population. Since its peak in 1950, the number of people in the city had fallen from 857,000 to 319,294 in 2010.

The St. Louis automobile industry, which was surpassed only by Detroit in the production of cars, once supported the families of more than 35,000 workers in and around the region, according to a report in the *St. Louis Dispatch*.

“The 175-acre site in north St. Louis, where General Motors manufactured the Chevrolet Caprice, Impala station wagon and pickup truck in addition to the Corvette, alone had payroll of 13,000 through at least the 1970s. A business park now occupies the property,” the newspaper wrote.

With the collaboration of the United Auto Workers union, the US car companies shut down plants and wiped out hundreds of thousands of jobs throughout the country, a process that culminated in the restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration in 2009.

Today, eight years after Ford closed its assembly plant in Hazelwood and five years after Chrysler shut down two operations in Fenton, vehicle production in the St. Louis region has dwindled to a single shift at the GM utility van plant in Wentzville.

All told, between 2000 and 2010, employment in St. Louis County—which includes the City of St. Louis, Ferguson and dozens of other communities in the metro area—fell by 15 percent.

Located 10 miles north of downtown St. Louis, Ferguson was formerly a bedroom community of relatively well-paid factory workers and their families. Many African American workers migrated from St. Louis to inner suburbs, like Ferguson, over the last 10 to 20 years, Professor Rank said, in search of better schools and living conditions.

The city of 21,000, whose population became predominantly African American during this period,

has been hit by the sharp economic downturn. Today, as one local writer described, the city’s neighborhoods are “pockmarked with vacant houses, half-empty ghetto strip-malls and are suffering from the fallout of the sub-prime meltdown.”

The town’s poverty rate is about double Missouri’s average, with 17.6 percent of the population, including 23.2 percent of those under age 18 and 13.6 percent of those 65 or over, living below the poverty line.

While youth in Ferguson face the misery of underfunded and overcrowded schools, the lack of recreation facilities and few if any prospects for decent jobs, the top six executives of Emerson Electric, the multinational corporation headquartered in the city, pocketed \$65 million last year in salaries and stock options.

“With Ford and Chrysler closing and people out of work,” Professor Rank concluded, “what has happened over the past week in Ferguson is reflective of underlying tensions affecting the whole area.”



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