

“I believe they are trying to move toward martial law”

Protesters denounce police killing of Michael Brown

Our reporters
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On Thursday, demonstrations and vigils were held across the United States mourning the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown—murdered by police on August 9 in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Those attending the demonstrations denounced the continuing attacks on demonstrators carried out by a heavily militarized police force.

In the days since Brown’s murder, protests have grown and the police response has become virtually indistinguishable from a US military occupation. Hundreds of paramilitary police officers, equipped by the Pentagon with a military arsenal, have descended on the St Louis area, firing rubber bullets and tear gas into crowds.

Thursday’s demonstrations were largely organized by groups around the Democratic Party and its associated organizations, including the NAACP, which have sought to intervene in Ferguson to contain social tensions and protests, while presenting the question of police brutality entirely in racial terms. However, the protests were also attended by hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of workers and youth.

The WSWS spoke to protesters in several cities.

In Chicago, Illinois, several thousand participated in a demonstration downtown.

Elizabeth said, “This violence is obviously systemic. There’s both racism and systemic economic inequality and poverty. And the government is resorting to a really awful process of militarization of the police. I believe some of the police have even been trained in places like Israel such as the IDF to come home and brutalize people here.”

Lolita Hughes, a plumbing inspector for the city of Chicago, came with her son Walter Smith to the

protest. Lolita said she was concerned about police brutality against young people, including her son, who has been harassed multiple times. “I don’t know why this is happening. Why should they kill young kids? It hurts me a lot when I see this being done by the police. The police harassed my son as well, even if he’s done nothing. He was riding in a car and they pulled him over and put him in cuffs. I’m worried about what will happen to him.” Walter noted the similarity of harassment of young people by police in Ferguson to what happens daily in Chicago: “Even if you are walking in a neighborhood doing nothing, the Chicago police will say you are a gang member. Even if I dress properly, talk politely, they treat you as if you are in a gang. They put me once in jail for doing nothing.”

Nadia Adams, an 18-year-old student at Aurora University, asked, “Why is the government sending military equipment to these police? This is not a war zone. This is America. This shouldn’t be happening in 2014. When did American cities become like Iraq and Afghanistan? Why is this happening?”

Chris Smith is a native from Ferguson who goes to school at Columbia College in Chicago. “I grew up in Ferguson. It’s my town. There’s a lot of police harassment there and I’ve gotten harassed by police too. Everyone I grew up with got harassed by the cops. But why are they doing this? I really want to know. I really wish I knew what’s going on in our society today.”

About 300 people, mostly workers and youth, attended a vigil in Hart Plaza, downtown Detroit. Dorothy, an office manager, said of Brown’s killing, “It’s an outrage! And it’s a shame. To shoot someone unarmed, it’s unthinkable, especially someone who is

running away from you.”

Dorothy opposed the militarization of the police, saying “It’s overkill. It’s like trying to use a bazooka to kill a fly. I believe they are trying to move toward martial law. I think that some things are staged deliberately so that people will be afraid and be willing to give up their rights.”

Margaret Cassetto, 29, is an artist who was evicted from her loft in downtown Detroit this February, when the building was purchased by Bedrock, the real estate company of Detroit’s richest man, Dan Gilbert. She said she had firsthand experience with repressive expansion of policing. “We were put under 24-hour surveillance [by Gilbert’s private security] to prevent social gatherings,” she said. “They were monitoring who came in and out.”

“Downtown has become colonized with private police,” she continued. “There’s been an exponential increase. The militarization is palpable. The same thing is happening in Belle Isle,” where state police have begun patrolling the island park after its sale to the State of Michigan.

Margaret said she was heartened by messages of support for Ferguson coming from residents of the Gaza strip through social media, saying “the global solidarity is really inspiring. It’s easy to feel isolated in these situations.”

Mitchell, a young worker, said of the crackdown on Ferguson, “We feel lots of citizens’ rights have been set upon. The police have land mine cruisers [MRAPs]. They are throwing incendiary devices at people.”

Claricha Evans, a family life educator, said, “There was nothing criminal about Michael Brown. He was just a regular guy. There was nothing that he was doing that was suspicious, except that he was black. Middle Eastern people living here have also been dealing with profiling since 9/11.”

Approximately 75 people gathered at the center of campus at nearby University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Ryan, a senior majoring in marketing, said: “The overall situation is scary. More and more people are becoming poor, the middle class is basically becoming extinct. At this point it is beyond race. In the Detroit area, even the people of Southfield, black or white or whatever, are defaulting on loans, losing their houses and all that.”

Several hundred people participated in a

demonstration in Manhattan, and there were others held throughout New York City.

Alexandra Smith said, “What is going on in Ferguson is scary. As a mother with two children to think that anyone can be subjected to these conditions is terrible. Michael Brown was not treated fairly. He was singled out and killed. This is wrong. Everyone matters just as much as the next person.

“What is happening in Ferguson is like I have seen in movies for years. They tell people to stay in their houses, and they order curfews. It is martial law. The police force is very militaristic. People are very confused by this. They are reacting to the military presence on their streets, and they are getting killed for it. I have never seen anything on this scale in this country. This looks like the war zones overseas.”

Close to 1,000 attended a vigil in Boston, Massachusetts. Among these were Carla Sheffield, whose son Burrell Ramsey was shot and killed by the Boston police during a routine traffic stop. “They say he pulled out a gun, but they never found a bullet hole. I don’t even know what he was pulled over for,” she said. “The officer was cleared of all charges.”



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