

# The state of emergency in Ferguson, Missouri

Barry Grey  
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The declaration of a state of emergency and imposition of a curfew on the working class town of Ferguson, Missouri mark a major escalation in the paramilitary crackdown on protests over the August 9 police murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager.

The state of emergency, announced Saturday by Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, has been accompanied by the renewed deployment of riot police wielding assault weapons and firing tear gas, buttressed by armored vehicles and military helicopters. Seven more residents were arrested early Sunday for defying the midnight-to-5 AM curfew, and one person was shot and critically wounded.

The escalation of state repression has quickly exposed as a fraud the talk of “dialogue” and “transparency” by Nixon and Missouri Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson, chosen by Nixon to take charge of security operations in the St. Louis suburb. With the aid of various Democratic politicians and operatives like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, Nixon, working in close consultation with the Obama administration, executed a maneuver to buy time.

The new measures, effectively suspending civil liberties and giving vast powers to the governor and even wider leeway to the police, make it impossible to credibly maintain that the crackdown carried out earlier in the week by the Ferguson police was the action of rogue, out-of-control local law enforcement.

The repression by a militarized police force and suspension of democratic rights in Ferguson are not merely a local issue. Nor are these events fundamentally a matter of race, despite the intensified efforts of the government and the media to insist otherwise. It did not take long before Captain Johnson, an African American and native of Ferguson, declared his support for the state of emergency, the curfew and the redeployment of armored vehicles and paramilitary riot police against mostly African American protesters.

The events in Ferguson are a concentrated expression of the real state of social and political relations in America.

The United States is a country riven by class tensions. Workers and youth, in towns such as Ferguson and countless others nationally, face mass unemployment, declining wages and living standards, and the destruction of basic social services.

At the same time, a new aristocracy, whose immense fortunes are based largely on financial speculation of a parasitic and quasi-criminal character, grabs an ever-bigger share of the national income and wealth. This ruling elite is terrified by the specter of social opposition from the working class. It has been preparing accordingly, over a protracted period.

Over the past several decades, the ruling class, under Democratic no less than Republican administrations, has built up a vast and unaccountable military-police-intelligence apparatus that serves as the defender of its economic and social interests. Over the past fifteen years, in particular, it has systematically transformed police departments all across the country into paramilitary forces, barely distinguishable from the military itself.

The Pentagon and other state agencies have distributed billions of dollars worth of military hardware to local police, from attack helicopters, tanks, planes and drones to assault rifles, grenade launchers, body armor and night goggles. They have trained local police to consider the working class populations in their cities to be the enemy, to be bloodily suppressed using the tactics of urban warfare.

Countless studies by military and intelligence agencies and academics have been produced on the techniques for mass repression within the United States. One recent Pentagon strategy paper on domestic urban warfare cited “radical income disparity” as the principal “driver of instability.”

A scholarly paper from 2006 entitled “A Paramilitary Policing Juggernaut” notes that “the now infamous security company, Blackwater [renamed Xe in 2009], has trained civilian police officers in the more technical aspects of urban warfare.” This is the same firm whose mercenaries carried out mass killings during the US

occupation of Iraq.

Police in America are being trained to view their local populations no differently than US troops were trained to view the people of Fallujah. Given the response of the ruling class to social unrest in a small Missouri suburb of 21,000 people, one can only imagine what is being prepared for major cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles.

The militarization of the police is only one facet of the buildup of the state apparatus of repression. Under the pretext of the “war on terror,” every basic democratic right has been gutted. The Patriot Act set the course for pervasive spying by the National Security Agency, FBI and CIA, in conjunction with state and local police, on every American. The Homeland Security Department established a huge source of funds and a clearinghouse for the buildup of domestic police forces. The Northern Command established, for the first time in US history, a military command covering the United States.

All of these agencies have been expanded under Obama, who asserts the right to detain and even assassinate American citizens without due process, and admits having done so.

The militarization of America and establishment of the framework of a police state go hand in hand with endless military aggression and war. There is no iron wall between foreign and domestic policy. Militarism and criminality abroad inevitably breed the destruction of democracy at home. Even as it wages war abroad, the American ruling class looks upon the United States itself as a battleground, and the working class as the enemy.

Both imperialist war and the destruction of democracy are driven by the vast decline in the global economic position of American capitalism, intensified by the breakdown of American and world capitalism in the 2008 Wall Street crash, which continues to deepen six years later.

It is striking that in the nonstop media commentary on the events in Ferguson, there is virtually no mention of the catastrophic economic and social conditions that underlie both the growth of police repression and the eruption of popular anger in response to it. One would never know that one out of four residents of St. Louis lives in poverty. Or that the wholesale closure of auto plants, breweries and other manufacturing facilities has led to the loss of two-thirds of St. Louis’s population since 1950. Or that 47 percent of the metropolitan area’s African American men between ages 16 and 24 are unemployed.

The well-off commentators, lawyers, academics,

preachers and politicians, most of them African American, being paraded before the TV cameras dare not even mention such facts. They are petrified of raising anything that speaks to the class divide in America, and the capitalist economic and political system they defend has no policies on offer to address the social crisis.

Unlike the 1960s, when the US ruling class responded to the urban uprisings with modest social reforms, today it has nothing to propose other than austerity and more repression.

The events in Ferguson must be taken as a warning. The preparations for dictatorship are far advanced. The question of police killings, along with all of the other attacks on democratic rights, is a political issue urgently confronting the entire working class.

There is broad opposition in the working class to the growth of social inequality, war and repression. The defense of democratic rights must be linked to the fight against imperialist war and the struggle to secure the basic social rights of the working class—the right to a decent-paying job, education, health care, housing, access to culture, and a secure retirement.

Police repression and police state spying must be ended through the dismantling of the Homeland Security Department, the Northern Command, the NSA, CIA, FBI and Pentagon.

The protests in Ferguson are only a foreshadowing of the social upheavals that are coming. What is urgently needed, however, is a clear revolutionary program and a leadership to transform these struggles into an independent political movement against both big business parties and the capitalist profit system.

That leadership is the Socialist Equality Party, which alone fights for an international socialist program in opposition to war, social inequality and the drive to dictatorship. The task before class-conscious workers, youth and students is to make the decision to join and build the SEP.



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