

Capitalism and the police-military mobilization in Ferguson, Missouri

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The events in Ferguson, Missouri over the past ten days mark a political turning point for the entire country. The immense scale of social inequality, the ruthlessness of the financial aristocracy, the disintegration of American democracy—all have been exposed in the execution-style police killing of unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown and the vicious crackdown on protests that erupted in response.

At the heart of all the social and democratic issues raised in Ferguson is the nature of the capitalist system. No struggle against inequality and the police state apparatus in America can be successful unless it is based on the understanding that what is involved is a struggle against the entire social and economic order.

What has taken place in recent days has revealed the political line-up of all factions of the political establishment against the working class. Last week, millions of people in the US and around the world were shocked by the images of tanks and riot police in military camouflage toting automatic rifles and using tear gas and rubber bullets to suppress protesters in the streets of Ferguson. The Obama administration and Democratic Governor Jay Nixon intervened with a maneuver aimed at buying time and defusing popular opposition.

Nixon placed oversight of policing in the hands of the Missouri Highway Patrol. Democratic Party operatives such as Al Sharpton followed up with a prayer meeting on Sunday calling for “unity” with the police.

These cynical gestures were intended to create the conditions for an even more aggressive crackdown, including the declaration of a “state of emergency” by the governor and the deployment of the National Guard. Cops fired tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful protests on Sunday and Monday night in the most sweeping police action thus far.

Checkpoints have been set up throughout the city, with police demanding identification from those passing by.

The police have arrested and threatened reporters and arbitrarily detained residents for the supposed crime of “congregating.”

Ferguson has been placed under martial law in all but name.

Under these conditions, President Obama once again stepped in with remarks at a press conference Monday afternoon. He sought to posture as evenhanded and unbiased, while placing principal responsibility for the violence in Ferguson on protesters. Attempting to justify police-state measures, he referred to “those who are using the tragic death as an excuse to engage in criminal behavior” by “looting or carrying guns and even attacking the police.”

These are lies. The principal “criminal behavior” was the murder of Michael Brown and the illegal and unconstitutional police operation that followed. On Monday, an independent autopsy report showed that the fatal shot to Brown struck the top of his head, indicating that the young man was on the ground and attempting to surrender, as claimed by eyewitnesses, when he was killed by police officer Darren Wilson. Despite clear evidence of the murder of an unarmed youth, Wilson remains at large.

Obama then acknowledged, somewhat grudgingly, that the population had certain constitutional rights, including the “right to speak freely, to assemble and to report in the press.” These rights must be “vigilantly safeguarded,” he said. “Ours is a nation of laws, for the citizens who live under them and for the citizens who enforce them.”

What a fraud! With Obama’s support, constitutional rights have been rendered a dead letter in the streets of Ferguson. Shortly before Obama spoke, police began clearing protesters from central locations in the city, following orders from Governor Nixon that no one be permitted to gather in these areas—a violation of the First Amendment right to free assembly.

Obama's by now ritualistic references, repeated again on Monday, to "one united American family" with a "common humanity" cannot hide the reality of life in the United States. These platitudes are issued by a president who has worked to further enrich the corporate and financial aristocracy through a redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top on a historically unprecedented scale. As for "humanity," it was Obama who issued the immortal lines at a press conference earlier this month that "we tortured some folks," while making clear that nothing would be done to hold accountable those who ordered or carried out the torturing.

Regardless of Obama's demagoguery and lies, social and political reality finds expression in popular consciousness. The anger on the streets of Ferguson is an expression of sentiments felt deeply throughout the country. It is an anger over not only police violence, but over unemployment, poverty, inequality and the relentless assault on the social conditions of the entire working class.

There is a growing realization within the working class that the problems working people face are systemic. In video interviews posted on the WSWS, workers and young people in Ferguson speak of the nature of capitalism, pointing to the vast resources that are devoted to the military and police even as the ruling class claims there is no money for education or jobs. They note the hypocrisy of American imperialism waging wars for "democracy" abroad even as it sends tanks against American cities at home.

This developing consciousness in the working class must be anchored to a clear political program on the basis of which a successful struggle can be waged. The central aim of the Socialist Equality Party in the US and its sister parties around the world is to build the revolutionary leadership—in St. Louis, throughout the country and internationally—that is required to arm the working class with such a socialist program.

The SEP calls for the mobilization of the entire working class behind the workers and youth of Ferguson, Missouri. Demonstrations and meetings demanding the arrest and prosecution of the killer of Michael Brown, the withdrawal of the National Guard and demobilization of the police, and the lifting of the state of emergency should be held throughout the country. These democratic demands should be linked to the defense of the social rights of the working class—the allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars to provide decent-paying jobs, education, health care and housing for all.

What is taking place in Ferguson is part of an attack on all workers. The police-state measures employed on the streets of that city, along with the vast intelligence and military apparatus, are directed against all opposition to the policies of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

The SEP insists that the defense of the democratic and social rights of the population in the United States must be connected to the struggle against imperialist war. The National Guard troops being deployed in Ferguson are the same forces that have been sent to brutally suppress the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The interests of the American working class in dismantling the US war machine are inextricably connected to the fight of workers all over the world against the machinations of the US ruling class, which is threatening to plunge the world into a new world war.

Nothing can be accomplished without a direct assault on the domination of society by a capitalist class that has shown it will shrink from nothing to defend its rule.

The basic question posed is: Who will rule? Will the ruling class and its instruments of repression continue to impose ever more savage attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class, while leading mankind to catastrophe? Or will the working class, the vast majority of the population, take political power and reorganize society on the basis of equality, a radical redistribution of wealth, and democratic control over the giant productive forces of humanity? This alternative is posed with ever-greater immediacy and urgency.

It is not enough to watch events unfold. We call on all our readers to make the decision to take up the fight for socialism—by joining and building the leadership of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party. *For more information on joining the SEP, click here.*



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