

De facto martial law in Ferguson, Missouri

Barry Grey
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The state of Missouri, with the full backing of the Obama administration, has responded to continuing protests against the police murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, by imposing de facto martial law on the largely working class city of Ferguson.

Residents have been stripped of the constitutionally guaranteed right to assemble, reporters have been arrested or banished in violation of freedom of the press, police checkpoints have been set up at major intersections. A massive force of military vehicles, helicopters, sound cannon, flash grenades, tear gas, SWAT teams wielding assault weapons and local cops backed by National Guard troops has been deployed to intimidate, terrorize and crush social protest.

On Monday night, the crackdown on overwhelmingly peaceful protesters demanding justice in the killing of Brown was stepped up. Seventy-eight people were arrested ostensibly for failing to obey a police order, for which there is no legal or constitutional basis, to disperse.

The scale of the repression is vastly disproportionate to the supposed threat from what the authorities are calling “criminal elements.” At a 2:20 am Tuesday press conference, Missouri Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson, who was put in charge of security operations last week by Democratic Governor Jay Nixon, could point only to two hand guns, one Molotov cocktail and some water bottles allegedly captured by the police to justify that night’s violent crackdown and mass arrests. He advised “peaceful protesters” to stay home Tuesday night so that the police could identify all those on the street as “outside agitators” and arrest them.

The arbitrary and disproportionate use of force has characterized the entire crisis. Brown, who was not carrying a weapon, was shot six times at point-blank range. Peaceful protests by outraged residents were met

with a military-style crackdown, mass arrests, the declaration of a state of emergency, and the imposition of what amounts to martial law.

As video reports posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* show, residents of Ferguson are making the connection between the military-police occupation of their city and the use of similar methods by the United States government in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are pointing to the hypocrisy of Washington’s claim to be defending democratic and human rights in the Middle East and Central Asia, while at home it responds to any sign of social opposition by employing the same anti-democratic and violent means it cites as the reason for overthrowing foreign governments.

This is the very point the WSWS made just days before the police murder of Brown. In an August 4 Perspective column entitled “The slaughter in Gaza: A warning to the international working class,” the WSWS wrote: “The Israeli onslaught in Gaza is a forewarning of the measures that will be used in every country against working class resistance to war, militarism and the agenda of austerity. The methods developed in the course of a decade of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to terrorise hostile populations will also be used against workers fighting to defend their jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.”

The resort to police state methods in Ferguson is the outcome of the protracted decay of American democracy. This process entered a new stage with the theft of the 2000 presidential election. It was accelerated after 9/11 and the declaration of the so-called “war on terror.” From the start, that phony war was used to justify an eruption of imperialist war abroad and an unrelenting assault on democratic rights within the US.

The past 13 years have seen a massive buildup of the repressive powers of the state at the expense of democratic rights, resulting today in the existence of a

police state in waiting. The USA Patriot Act, which sanctioned the unbridled expansion of government spying on the people of America and the world, was followed by the establishment of the Homeland Security Department, which has coordinated and funded, along with the Pentagon, the transformation of local police into paramilitary counterinsurgency forces. The Northern Command, the first ever military command covering the territory of the United States, was set up.

These innovations were accompanied by countless studies and plans developed by military and intelligence agencies and think tanks for urban warfare and mass repression to quash social protest in the US. The 2013 Boston Marathon bombings were seized on as an opportunity to put such plans to the test. For the first time in American history, a major urban area was placed under a military-police lockdown and civil liberties were effectively suspended. The absence of any significant protest from any section of the political or media establishment confirmed the collapse of any commitment to democracy within the ruling class.

The assault on democratic rights under George W. Bush has been accelerated under Barack Obama. The current president has not only shielded the authors of torture programs and the Guantanamo gulag from prosecution, he has asserted his right to indefinitely detain and even assassinate US citizens without due process, and admitted to having done so.

The driving force behind these advanced preparations for a police state is the immense growth of social inequality. A quasi-criminal corporate-financial elite, which enriches itself on the basis of speculative activities of a parasitical nature while destroying the industrial infrastructure and decent-paying jobs, arrogates to itself an ever greater share of the national wealth. This form of criminality is inextricably linked to a criminal foreign policy based on aggression, war and plunder.

Every democratic and social demand of the working class collides with the social interests of this new aristocracy. It views every manifestation of social protest as a threat to its interests that must be immediately smashed.

The vast and unaccountable military-police-intelligence apparatus that has been built up over the years functions as the guarantor of the interests of this

criminal capitalist elite. A political analysis of the events in Ferguson must begin not with the empty and insincere rhetoric of Obama and other politicians, but with what they are doing. In the interests of the financial oligarchy they serve, they are mobilizing the repressive violence of the state to terrorize the working class in Ferguson and set a precedent to be used in cities all across the country.

This is the reality of America. Not accidentally, the most socially unequal of all advanced industrialized countries is also the most undemocratic. The root cause is the capitalist system itself, which is incapable of meeting the basic needs of the working class, the vast majority of the population.



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