

Cleveland, Ohio residents denounce repression in Ferguson

Our reporters
21 August 2014

Over the weekend, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* leafleted at the campus of Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio and spoke to workers and young people about the developments in Ferguson, Missouri. Many drew connections between the two cities on questions of escalating police brutality and dire social conditions.

Cleveland, like other major industrial cities in the American Midwest, has seen thousands of manufacturing jobs wiped out over the past decade. The real unemployment rate remains in the double digits, though the official jobless rate has ticked down due to population loss and the large drop in labor force participation rate.

Over one in three Cleveland residents live in poverty, according to federal Census data. More than half of children live in poverty (53 percent), a rate surpassed by only two major cities included in federal statistics—Detroit (59 percent) and San Juan, Puerto Rico (58 percent).

According to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, more than 3,600 public school children are homeless, a phenomenon that has only continued to grow since the economic recession and official “recovery.” Cleveland homeless shelters frequently exceed capacity; a 2012 survey of homelessness in Cuyahoga County by the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless found 21,873 homeless in the Cleveland area.

As in Detroit, the growing social crisis has provoked a ferocious assault by the ruling establishment and their corporate masters, the very forces responsible for the deteriorating conditions. Crime, drug addiction, and other byproducts of poverty are met with police brutality and the closures of schools and libraries. The collapse of industry has served as a pretext for tax

giveaways to corporations and the ripping up of work contracts.

Layoffs in the past year include the axing of hundreds of jobs at the Cleveland Clinic—the region’s largest employer. In January, 200 employees were laid off, 700 were pushed into early retirement options and 500 open positions were left unfilled. In April, 430 Cleveland Hopkins International Airport personnel were given pink slips after United Airlines announced it was eliminating its hub in the city. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* last year cut nearly a third of its staff, after several rounds of major layoffs in the decade prior. The city orchestra, libraries and other cultural institutions have all been the target of cuts in recent years.

While the city remains a steel manufacturing center due to the convergence of rail lines and its location on Lake Erie, numerous idled or abandoned mills line the Cuyahoga River. Industry giants like Republic Steel and the conglomerate LTV Steel continue to be headquartered in Cleveland. In 2009, global steel company ArcelorMittal abruptly cut hundreds of jobs and shut down its Cleveland furnaces, citing lower demand in the auto industry. In February of this year, US Steel Corporation announced the layoff of steelworkers at its Lorain Tubular Operations.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Cleveland residents on the events in Ferguson, as well as their own experiences. Many drew parallels to the economic situation and the aggressive character of the local police force.

“Crazy. That’s one word for it. I don’t know what else to call it,” said Ron, 45, of the police response in Ferguson. “It’s like they’re in Iraq somewhere. It’s stupid to turn on your own citizens like that. If he [Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson] shot him with his hands up, he should go to jail.”

Ron, who worked at the LTV steel mill in Cleveland until it was idled, agreed with WSWS reporters who drew a connection between social conditions in the US and the escalating military aggression abroad. “If the US goes into Ukraine, it’s over. I don’t think we need to go over there.”

Charmesha Crawford, 19, told the WSWS, “Police get away with too much and use their weapons too freely.”

Eighteen-year-old India Greene agreed. “They know they can get away with it. I think they should stick to the standard weapons. What do they need military weapons coming from war? They don’t need all that. I can see if we were getting attacked or something—but this was just ordinary people, that boy wasn’t even armed.”

Charmesha and India are recent high school graduates. Both expressed the opinion that the economic situation was worsening rather than improving. India told the WSWS she was going to go into the military because she needed money and a job. “College is not for me. That [the military] is the best option, instead of sticking around and working at McDonald’s or something,” she said, adding that she thought she would be able to go into a social services rather than combat role.

WSWS reporters asked what India would do if money weren’t such an urgent issue. “Nursing,” she said. “Something I could get training in quickly.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to Patricia who, like India, is attracted to the military in search of economic opportunity. Patricia is a newly enrolled student at Cleveland State University hoping to study mechanical engineering. She expressed worry that without financial assistance from the military, she will be unable to afford her education or else be buried under student loan debt once she graduates. Unable to afford rent, Patricia told the WSWS that she is currently living in the nearby women’s shelter waiting for classes to start.

Gino, 29, said he had been beaten up by cops while homeless a few years ago. He was accused of stealing a sandwich from a convenience store and spent five months in jail without access to a lawyer. “It is animal-like how they treat people.” Alluding to a high-profile police shooting in Cleveland in 2012, he added, “Actually, the police treat people worse than animals. They dehumanize us.”

Gino also drew a connection between the police tactics in Ferguson and the trumped-up “terrorism” case following Occupy Wall Street protests in Cleveland. “I knew those five guys. They were all peaceful people, nothing to do with ‘terrorism.’ The FBI set them up to shut down that movement.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact