

Class, race and the police killing in Ferguson, Missouri

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In response to the eruption of popular anger over the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the ruling class has employed a two-pronged strategy. It has mobilized the repressive apparatus of the state—militarized police firing tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful protesters, the declaration of a “state of emergency” by the governor of Missouri, the deployment of the National Guard, the imposition of *de facto* martial law.

At the same time, after the initial outrage over the transformation of Ferguson into a war zone, the ruling elite has mobilized the political and media practitioners of identity politics.

The aim is to try to convince the workers and youth of majority-African American Ferguson and beyond that if those heading the apparatus of repression are likewise African American, this somehow makes the destruction of their democratic rights acceptable, even progressive. Political hucksters Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson were flown into the city last weekend to preach “unity” with the police and heap praise on the new head of security operations, the African American Missouri Highway Patrol captain, Ron Johnson.

With the media obsessing on the question of race (CNN hosted a town hall conversation on race and Ferguson Tuesday night in which the moderators actually segregated black and white participants), a column published this past weekend in *Time* magazine by former basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is, however limited its political conclusions, refreshing.

Under the headline “The Coming Race War Won’t Be About Race,” Abdul-Jabbar writes that it is necessary to “address the situation [in Ferguson] not just as another act of systemic racism, but as what else it is: class warfare.” Opposing those who foster racial (and also gender) divisions, he insists that “this fist-

shaking of everyone’s racial agenda distracts America from the larger issue that the targets of police overreaction are based less on skin color and more on an even worse Ebola-level affliction: being poor.”

The basic social division in America, Abdul-Jabbar notes, is between the rich and everyone else. He cites a 2012 Pew Research Center report on the collapse of the “middle class,” which has seen its median income fall 5 percent in the last ten years. “Fewer people (just 23 percent) think they will have enough money to retire,” Abdul-Jabbar writes. “Most damning of all: fewer Americans than ever believe in the American Dream mantra that hard work will get them ahead.”

Abdul-Jabbar is not a socialist, and his prescriptions for addressing social inequality do not rise above reformist appeals. His article is more a warning to the political establishment of the explosive consequences of incorrectly appraising the Ferguson events. However, in his emphasis on the centrality of class, not race, as the basic social division—in Ferguson and in the country as a whole—he is entirely correct.

Significantly, the column has provoked a howl of protest from political representatives of the upper-middle class who are heavily invested in racial politics. These include the International Socialist Organization and columnist Dave Zirin, who also serves as the sports columnist for the *Nation* magazine. Zirin penned a column published on the ISO’s web site Wednesday, “Racism killed Mike Brown,” dedicated to refuting Abdul-Jabbar.

Denouncing Abdul-Jabbar for daring to suggest that the killing of Michael Brown and police repression in general is fundamentally about “being poor,” Zirin insists, “Michael Brown was shot dead by the police because he is Black. If he was white, no matter how poor, he almost certainly wouldn’t have died. If that is

not your starting point, then you are lost without a compass.”

In declaring that the “starting point” for understanding what happened in Ferguson is not class or economic inequality—ABC for any socialist—but race, the ISO brands itself as an anti-socialist and anti-working class organization. Race is a factor in American life, including the ruling class’s system of police repression. It is, however, a secondary and subordinate factor, and one that is bound up with basic class issues.

In a society based on the economic exploitation of the working class, the state is fundamentally an instrument of class oppression. Contrary to the provocative claims of Zirin, many victims of police brutality are white (one could cite the murder of James Boyd in Albuquerque earlier this year), while the police in cities like Detroit are predominantly black. The majority of poor in the United States are white, while the most concentrated levels of poverty and oppression of African American workers can be found in cities that have been run by African American politicians for decades.

What worries the ISO and Zirin is not simply the writings of Abdul-Jabbar, but a fear that one of the central mechanisms that the ruling class uses to maintain its political domination is failing. Workers are beginning to see through the fraud of racial politics.

In its discussions with workers and youth involved in the protests in Ferguson, the *World Socialist Web Site* encountered a growing recognition of these basic class issues. Many spoke of the common economic conditions facing workers of all races and the responsibility of the capitalist system. Others denounced the self-serving and corrupt multimillionaire operatives like Sharpton and Jackson, who are exploiting the death of Brown for their own ends, entirely bound up with the defense of the existing economic and political set-up.

The comments of protesters in Ferguson reflect a growing anticapitalist sentiment, not only in Ferguson, but throughout the country. Workers are beginning to make connections, to see individual injustices as the product of a broader socioeconomic system.

There has been an experience with the racial politics promoted by the Democratic Party. Obama, the first African American president (hailed in 2008 by the ISO as a “transformative candidate”), has presided over an

unprecedented growth of social inequality, a series of wars, and an assault on the most basic democratic rights.

The ISO and Zirin, political agents of the Democratic Party, see the discrediting of identity politics as a mortal threat. They speak for privileged sections of the middle class—trade union functionaries, academics, sections of the corporate establishment—with a vested interest in maintaining the subordination of workers to the ruling class and its political apparatus. The racial identity politics of the ISO complement the racism of sections of the ruling class. Both have the common aim of dividing the working class and preventing a united political struggle against capitalism.

The events in Ferguson have revealed the brutality of the state and should be seen as a warning to the entire working class. The American ruling class, whose interests are defended by the state and its repressive agencies, is terrified at the prospect of a growth of social protest. It is isolated and held in contempt by the broad masses of the people. All of its official institutions are increasingly discredited. Its immediate reaction to any expression of social opposition is to smash it.

The chasm between the vast majority of the people and the corporate-financial aristocracy is not only the source of the type of state violence seen in Ferguson, it is also the driving force of social revolution, a fact that terrifies the likes of Zirin and the ISO.



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