

“Eric Garner was murdered for selling cigarettes”

Thousands march in New York City against police violence

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25 August 2014

Thousands of people attended a march in the New York City borough of Staten Island on Saturday to oppose police violence in New York and around the US. The march assembled on the corner where 43-year-old Staten Island resident Eric Garner was killed in July by police officers when they put him in a chokehold.

Workers and youth—including hospital workers, teachers, and hundreds of students from the New York metropolitan area—came not only to express anger over the killing of Garner, but also the hundreds of other recent victims of police violence, including Michael Brown, the 18-year old unarmed youth killed in Ferguson, Missouri.

Protestors chanted, “Hands up, don’t shoot”, raising their hands in the symbol of protest that has come from demonstrations in Ferguson in the last two weeks. Marchers also told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were concerned over the deployment of militarized police and the National Guard against Missouri residents who were protesting Brown’s killing.

Garner’s memory and the circumstances of his death added tremendous emotional weight to the demonstration. Large numbers came from Tompkinsville, the area where the rally assembled, one of the poorest communities in New York City.

A friend of Eric Garner’s, Dina, told the WSWS, “It’s a senseless murder. They did not have to kill this man. They could have gone about in a whole different manner. He was my friend from when I was 11 years old. He lived in Coney Island houses, I lived in Graves End houses [in Brooklyn]. He was never about violence. Okay, he was selling cigarettes. But to be murdered for selling cigarettes? Is that right? Is that moral?”

When WSWS reporters raised the issue of the similar police killings across the US, and the clampdown on protest in Ferguson, Dina said, “If you want my honest opinion, it’s a conspiracy by the police. They don’t like what they see in this community. Our community is very diverse. We have Blacks, Italians, Chinese, Albanians, Russians. We all live here in harmony. I am very scared about what the future is going to bring to this world. The rich want to make us poorer, and they want to cut food stamps. We are all united here, and we want this officer indicted.”

Another protestor, Angela Young, who said she was laid off a year ago after five years as a dietician at Kingsborough Hospital in Brooklyn, addressed some of the economic conditions fueling the anger on display at the march. “I will run out of my unemployment benefits because of the cuts. It affects us all, what they are doing with the unemployment, food stamps, Medicaid.

“Garner’s killing was just plain, old-fashioned police brutality. The police should have known better because the chokehold has been banned since 1993. He was selling cigarettes so he could survive and take care of his family. We are taking a political stand now about what is happening.”

Johnny Holloway, a senior in high school, said, “The police for a long time have felt like they are superior to us. Maybe they didn’t plan for Eric Garner to die, but they have no problem using force. They have a different mentality than you or me, because they are given power and when people have power they abuse it.”

Asked about events in Ferguson, he said, “It is scary to see the pictures, it looks like they could have come

from Afghanistan.”

Maureen Haggerty, an English teacher at Queens Community College and Bronx Community College, said, “In my classroom is see young men just like Eric Garner must have looked when he was younger. I am here because we need to stand up against what the police are doing, and I need to show my students the need to fight against this. There have been so many now: Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Eric Garner, and more.

“I don’t know why the Federal government gives so much money for weapons to police departments. The police now just shoot first and ask questions later.”

These sentiments stood in stark relief to those expressed by the organizers of the march, principally the Reverend Al Sharpton’s National Action Network (NAN), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and several trade unions, who sought to keep opposition to police brutality within the confines of the Democratic Party.

The so-called “progressive” Democratic Mayor of New York City, Bill De Blasio did not attend the march, which was unsurprising, given his recent support for Police Commissioner William Bratton and the “broken windows” police practice, which has been the ostensible reason for so much of the aggressive behavior of the NYPD over the last decade.

Former New York State Governor David Paterson, however, did attend, and spoke to the rally at the end of the march at the Richmond County (Staten Island) District Attorney’s office, as did many lower-level Democratic Party officeholders and religious figures.

George Gresham, president of 1199 SEIU, the hospital workers’ union, told protesters, “We are not anti-police. We know that fighting crime is not easy.” In support of this theme, 1199 had given its members signs that read, “Support NYPD; Stop Police Brutality.”

The former FBI informant Al Sharpton warned demonstrators not to oppose the NYPD, but to urge on Mayor de Blasio to reform it. “We are not saying all police are bad. We are not marching against the police, we are marching against the chokehold,” he added. Sharpton said that the NYPD must “get rid of the bad apples.”

Eric Garner’s family also addressed the rally. Speaking genuinely, they thanked the protesters

because they had come not only in memory of Eric Garner, but for all victims of police violence. Garner’s widow, Esaw, speaking of the chokehold death of her husband by the NYPD, said, “It’s not white or black; they did wrong and they need to pay for doing wrong.”

Sharpton and other Democratic Party officials did everything possible to keep the protests contained. At one point, in reaction to angry statements from the crowd, Sharpton came back to the podium to admonish protesters “Don’t come and piss in my party. And anybody that acts up we’re going to expose if you’re working against the forces of justice.”

Many people at the march were not buying it. One demonstrator, Pambana B. from Harlem, remarked to the WSWS: “A lot of folks here are not being seduced by Sharpton’s narrative. People in power are shaped by big money. People here are against state violence and violence authorized by the state.”



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