

# The official cover-up of social and political issues in the police murder of Michael Brown

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Thousands of workers and youth participated in funeral services for Michael Brown on Monday, an expression of widespread outrage over the police murder of the unarmed 18-year-old. However, the funeral service itself, attended by three representatives of the Obama administration and presided over by Democratic Party operative Al Sharpton, was a thoroughly establishment, right-wing affair.

The aim of the ceremony, paid for and run by Sharpton's organization, was to obscure the class issues raised by the killing of Brown, legitimize the de facto imposition of martial law in Ferguson, Missouri, and channel social opposition back behind the political establishment.

The ruling class responded to the spontaneous eruption of protests over the killing of Brown with a two-pronged strategy. First, the repressive apparatus of the state was mobilized, including militarized SWAT teams toting automatic weapons, driving armored vehicles, and firing tear gas, rubber bullets and bean bags at peaceful protesters. More than 200 people were arrested in the police crackdown.

Ferguson became a test case for imposing police-state conditions on an American city in response to social unrest. Journalists were threatened, arrested and assaulted. The National Guard was called in. A curfew was imposed and the constitutional right to assemble was effectively suspended under the "state of emergency" declared by Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat.

Sheer repression did not suffice to silence the protests, however. Hence the second prong of the ruling class strategy. Figures such as Sharpton along with local preachers and Democratic Party politicians were mobilized to promote racial politics and direct the protests along safe channels. The Obama administration

sent Attorney General Eric Holder, an African American, to Ferguson, and Governor Nixon appointed Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson, also an African American, to head up the police response.

This dual strategy found expression in the funeral eulogy delivered by Sharpton—both in what he said, and what he did not say. The one-time FBI informant spoke not as a partisan of the workers and youth of Ferguson, but rather as an emissary of the capitalist state, i.e., of the very forces that killed Brown and sought to crush the subsequent protests.

Most significant in Sharpton's remarks was the absence of any reference to the social and economic issues underlying the killing of Brown (and hundreds of other police killings across the country) and the mass repression that followed. There was no mention of the unemployment and poverty that characterize Ferguson and cities throughout the country, nor was there any reference to the immense social inequality that drives the ruling class to employ increasingly violent means to suppress social anger and unrest.

Instead, Sharpton devoted much of his remarks to vile slurs against African-American youth in general and the protesters in Ferguson in particular. He complained that too many people are "sitting around having ghetto pity parties." Celebrating the fact that a section of African Americans like himself have "got some positions of power," he denounced those who "decide it ain't black no more to be successful." He continued, "Now you wanna be a n\*\*\*\*r and call your woman a ho."

These foul remarks, dripping with contempt, were combined with an open defense of the state. "We are not anti-police, we respect police," proclaimed Sharpton. The murder of youth like Brown is the product only of a few "bad apples," he declared, which

can be corrected with measures like hiring more African-American police officers.

While avoiding any criticism of the massive military-police response to the protests over Brown's killing, Sharpton repeated all the tropes used by the state to justify its repression. He bemoaned the fact that Brown's parents "had to break their mourning to ask folks to stop looting and rioting," adding, "Michael Brown must be remembered for more than disturbances."

The use of the word "disturbances," part of the lexicon of the police and military, is significant, carrying with it the implication that the protests were illegitimate. The police repression, Sharpton implied, was a necessary response to violence by the protesters.

He made no mention of the connection between domestic repression and the waging of aggressive wars abroad, ignoring the fact, noted by many Ferguson workers and youth who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, that even as the National Guard was being deployed to Ferguson, Obama was once again ramping up the US military's involvement in Iraq.

Sharpton's support for the police crackdown reflects what he is: an agent of the state and representative of a section of the corporate establishment and upper-middle class that has amassed great wealth even as the great majority of the population, including African-American workers and youth, has seen its living standards plummet. This privileged and corrupt social layer has long promoted identity politics to conceal the basic class divide in society and sow divisions within the working class.

In particular, Sharpton spoke as a representative of the Obama administration. He has developed the closest ties with administration officials, coordinating his actions and remarks with the White House. This is an administration that has intensified the assault on the working class and overseen an enormous growth of social inequality, while increasing the militarization of the police.

The financial aristocracy reacts to any expression of social opposition with repression. In the 1960s, the ruling class responded to urban uprisings with violence, but that was followed by pledges to address inequality and poverty and the implementation of limited social reforms. Today, the ruling class has nothing to offer but more repression.

The events in Ferguson are an expression of the explosive character of social relations in the United States. The financial aristocracy is petrified over the revolutionary implications of the open emergence of class conflict. Hence the resort to violence on the one hand and reliance, on the other, on Sharpton and other so-called "civil rights" leaders to complement state terror with diversions and lies.



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