

New York transit workers discuss political lessons of Ferguson, Missouri

Our reporters
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Working people are continuing to study and draw the lessons after weeks of protests following recent police killings, including that of Eric Garner in New York and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. WSWs reporters discussed the issues with transit workers in New York City.

Desire Daniels is a subway car cleaner, and she told the WSWs, “On so many different levels, what happened in Ferguson is wrong.

“One thing I know about Ferguson is that it is low income. I’ve done research on Ferguson, and I also found out there have been no homicides and little ‘black-on-black’ crime for 12 years until Michael Brown was murdered. This is part of the answer to those who try to say some of the brutal police actions were justified by so-called criminal looting. There was little crime until Michael Brown was murdered. This police brutality is what they did to Michael Brown and what they are doing elsewhere.

“Police have been killing black men and brutally beating black women for years. Ferguson is a worst case. There was a 93-year-old black woman with dementia who was beaten by the California Highway Patrol. There is a videotape that I’ll show you. She was beaten for no reason. He pounded her face in repeatedly, then came back and did it again. Then you have Eric Garner here in Staten Island. They are using military tactics.

“I believe the shooting was racist, but I also do believe all sections of working people should be united. I believe immigrant workers have the right to be treated fairly and equally. I know a few friends from other countries who were doctors, lawyers and professionals in their countries, and when they move here the only job they can get is working in a car wash. This is

completely unfair, and I’m against the mistreatment of immigrants.

“About the looting that may have happened in Ferguson, which some say justifies military actions by the police. There is a cause for every effect. If you keep beating the population of Ferguson, they are going to react, and the reaction may not stop short of looting. These are people who are suffering because their wages are low, unemployment is high, social programs are being cut and their rights are being taken away.

“We are going to end up with a war in this country because people are tired of being pushed around and forced to keep silent. We do our jobs, take care of our families and don’t break the law. But what are we getting in return? Low wages, horrible housing conditions with high rents, rats and roaches. And the food in low-income area grocery stores is bad and often out of date. People can’t continue to live this way.

“And now I am afraid for my children. I have two sons. One is 13 and the other is 7. They are both playing football. The costs are high, but I’m trying to keep them in sports to keep them off the streets. My daughter is in cheerleading.

“People are tired, angry and frustrated. My oldest son asks me, ‘Mom are they going to shoot me for no reason?’ and he asks whether he will have to live in these bad housing conditions too when he grows up.

“I think the killing in Ferguson was brutal and senseless. Michael Brown was an innocent youth. I am very emotional about this, and I am trying to hold back my tears to talk to you. It is not personal racism, it is the system. It is set up to keep us down.”

Latisha Dipaola is also a cleaner. She said, “I don’t believe in unarmed people being shot and killed. That is excessive force and an abuse of power. When cops say they see someone reaching for something, it could

be anything like a phone or a wallet. The police see a gun. Police are too quick to act. They are trigger-happy.

“When they send militarized police forces out there, it is another form of intimidation. We have a right to speak out. We have a right to protest. These are our Constitutional rights. They say they are there to ensure the public safety, but who is protecting the protesters?”

“When police are lined up in front of you in military formation, their presence is there to intimidate the public. When you have town police, state police and the National Guard out against protesting townspeople, they are treating people like animals. People will act out because they are made to feel that way.

“I sympathize with the family of Michael Brown. They should have let them know the facts about who killed their son. It has become a crisis because the government wants to take control, and the people won’t let them. The people lost their trust when the police shot Michael Brown down. The people are taking a stand, and I can respect that.”

Lala Cortes, an MTA worker, said about police brutality, “It is horrible and unfair. The police treat us like we have no rights, especially black people. We have to fight against this; it is like every day there is a police killing.

“Obama is playing golf when he makes a few statements. He is not involved in stopping this from happening. He is not doing all that he can.”

When asked about the Federal programs that are arming the police with military equipment, “They use these weapons more than they need to. If it is a terrorist it would make sense to use these kinds of weapons, but the police are using them against everyone.

“I even heard that cops are spying on people using the cameras on peoples’ cell phones. Why are they allowed to do this?

“Cops don’t care about the people, and they are getting away with everything. The most you hear about is that one will get suspended and then they just let them come back to work. They don’t know how to talk to people; they just show up and start handcuffing and slamming innocent people on the ground.

“My brother was even taken in on after stop-and-frisk. He had done nothing wrong, when they searched him he didn’t have any drugs or weapons on him, but they just said that they could hold him for four hours. Eventually I had to go in at four in the morning just to

get him out.”

Sarah, an Indian immigrant and an MTA worker, said, “The police are using weapons like they are going to war with a different country. Ferguson is even different than what happened with Eric Garner, in terms of outrage and police actions.

“You can’t trust the police now. As much as they say something is an accident, I think they are talking inside the police departments the need to keep doing this and keep up a racial divide. It is used to divide people because it makes them weaker.

“I think the police are doing this kind of thing because of the intensification of the economic crisis and the wars abroad. People are becoming afraid to speak out.”



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