

From Detroit to Ferguson: The brutal face of American capitalism

Jerry White
29 August 2014

Recent events in Detroit, Michigan and Ferguson, Missouri have revealed the brutal character of American capitalism.

On Tuesday, Detroit resumed the shutoff of water service to tens of thousands of low-income families that owe as little as \$150. More than 600 households had their taps turned off just over the last few days, leaving seniors, the disabled and families with small children without water to drink, bathe, flush or cook.

The water shutoffs are aimed at removing service from entire sections of the city considered unprofitable, priming the water department for privatization. This is part of a “restructuring” of the city as a whole under the direction of an emergency manager and the federal bankruptcy court.

Court proceedings will begin this week to confirm a plan that will gut the pensions and health benefits of city workers and hand over public assets, including the Detroit Institute of Arts, to private concerns. Billionaire real estate developers are taking over entire tracts of land, at public expense, while working class neighborhoods are deprived of essential services, depopulated and in some cases transformed into urban farmland.

Detroit is at the epicenter of a social counterrevolution being carried out by the American ruling class and both of its political parties, aimed at turning the clock backwards more than a century and stripping workers of the most elementary necessities of life.

The events in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson have revealed the political forms that correspond to this social process. Police state methods of rule that have been built up for more than a decade under the rubric of the “war on terror” have been deployed to crush social unrest.

On August 9, police in Ferguson shot and killed Michael Brown, who was 18 years old and unarmed. It was an execution-style killing.

In response to an outpouring of popular anger, state and local officials, with the backing of the Obama administration, imposed conditions of virtual martial law in the town of 21,000 people. First Amendment rights were effectively suspended and a “state of emergency” declared, the National Guard was dispatched, and a militarized police force, armed with tanks and assault weapons used for warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, tear gassed and arrested demonstrators involved in peaceful protests.

Water shutoffs in Detroit and mass repression in Ferguson expose the true face of the American ruling class. In the aftermath of the urban rebellions in the 1960s, along with brutal state repression, the ruling elite responded with a program of limited social reforms. The phrase “guns and butter” was coined to describe the policy, stillborn from the beginning, of simultaneously funding the imperialist war in Vietnam and anti-poverty programs in the US.

Today there is no section of the American political establishment that is calling for measures to alleviate the social crisis. In all of the official declamations on the police killing in Ferguson, there was barely a mention of the underlying social conditions of unemployment, poverty and inequality. The representatives of corporate America stand united in the drive to take back every social concession ever extracted by the working class.

Petrified by the specter of working class resistance, the oligarchy that rules America responds to any sign of social opposition by seeking to crush it. It has no reforms to offer, only more repression.

An understanding of these processes must begin with

the recognition that they arise out of the capitalist system itself. In its effort to defend this system and maintain its wealth, the ruling class has been carrying out a decades-long policy of war abroad and class war at home. The long-term economic decline of American capitalism has been accompanied by the rise of a ruthless financial aristocracy that bases itself on plunder and criminality.

This is an international process, as can be seen in the imposition of brutal austerity measures in Europe, Latin America and throughout the world to bail out the financial institutions that crashed the global economy in 2008.

In the United States, the Obama administration has spearheaded this social counterrevolution and overseen the greatest transfer of wealth in history from the broad masses to the richest one percent. At the same time, Obama has expanded US military operations around the world and escalated the attack on democratic rights, from the spread of NSA spying to the militarization of the police.

Nowhere in the present political system do the interests of the vast majority of the population find expression. At the same time, the old institutions that in a previous period mediated class relations have collapsed.

The trade unions, run by wealthy executives who get a share of the profits obtained through the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent, can hardly manage a pro forma protest as thousands in Detroit are cut off from one of life's most basic necessities. They are, in fact, fully integrated into the bankruptcy process, giving their support in return for a share of the billions being stolen from the pensions and health benefits of city workers and the sell-off of city assets.

As for Ferguson, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka issued a perfunctory statement telling protesters to rely on the Justice Department and the FBI, the very forces that have sanctioned domestic spying and framed up anti-war and anti-Wall Street protesters as "terrorists."

In the aftermath of Ferguson's transformation into an armed camp, supposed oppositional figures within the political establishment, led by the millionaire political huckster Al Sharpton, promoted the politics of racial identity in order to cover up the more basic social and class issues in Ferguson, and accused the protesters

themselves of provoking the violence. These same forces are lined up behind the bankruptcy of Detroit.

Allied with the Sharptons and Jesse Jacksons, operating in the orbit of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, are a host of pseudo-left organizations and the practitioners of identity politics, who see their central task as preventing the working class from breaking free of the political establishment.

The growth of mass opposition cannot and will not remain confined to this framework. The events in Ferguson are a sign that the working class is moving in another trajectory. In interviews with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, protesters saw their situation as part of a broader, systemic problem. Many pointed to the hypocrisy of the claim that America is waging wars for human rights and democracy overseas while it is suppressing democratic rights in the US itself. Many denounced the allocation of billions of dollars for wars and the militarization of the police while no money is provided for decent-paying jobs, housing, education or health care.

The most pressing question is the building of a new revolutionary leadership—the Socialist Equality Party—to give conscious political expression to the emerging resistance of the working class.

The SEP fights for the unity of all workers, across racial, national and ethnic lines, in opposition to the Democratic and Republican Parties and all their political agents. We call on workers throughout the country to form independent organizations of struggle to prepare mass demonstrations and work actions against the disaster being created by the ruling class.

Above all, the SEP insists that the fight against social inequality, war and dictatorship must be waged as an international fight against the capitalist system. Who will organize society, the corporations and banks on the basis of plunder and profit, or the working class, fighting for a socialist society based on equality and the democratic control of the productive forces? This is the basic question arising out of the experiences in Ferguson and Detroit.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact