

Department of Justice launches investigation into Ferguson police

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US Attorney General Eric Holder announced Thursday that the Department of Justice (DOJ) would investigate “allegations of unlawful policing by the City of Ferguson Police Department.” Additionally, Holder said that a “Collaborative Reform Initiative” had been launched, involving the federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and the St. Louis County Police Department (SLCPD).

These new measures come nearly a month after the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old, by a police officer. They follow a civil criminal investigation already launched by the DOJ in conjunction with the FBI.

Following Brown’s murder on August 9, protests surged in and around the city of Ferguson. The protests, which were overwhelmingly peaceful, drew a vicious response from the local and county police and ultimately the Federal government.

Images flooded social media of unarmed, peaceful protesters being held at gunpoint by police in military camouflage brandishing M16 combat-assault rifles. Reporters were intimidated and threatened with death, as seen in this video of an officer screaming “I will f***ing kill you” to several journalists. The crowd was repeatedly hit with gas canisters, rubber bullets, and baton charges from the officers.

On August 16, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, declared a state of emergency. Residents were placed under de facto martial law as the National Guard descended on the city, complete with armored vehicles and sophisticated crowd-dispersing weapons.

Police assaulted and arrested reporters for publications ranging from Al Jazeera America and *Huffington Post* to Getty Images and the *Washington Post*. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, chiefly for disobeying curfew laws and “unlawful assembly.”

Residents described the situation as a one-sided war zone. Protesters repeatedly told the on-the-spot reporting team of the WSWs that it was as if the US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan had come home and assaulted and occupied an American city.

It is within this context of gross violations of the right to peacefully assemble that the Obama administration and its legal arm are demonstrating nervousness. With midterm elections two months away and Obama’s approval rating at or near record lows, his administration seeks to pull out his oldest trick: posturing as concerned and sensibly aware of the plight of the masses.

Holder, in his press conference, explained the rationale behind the new investigation. “While there is much work left to do, we feel confident that there are solutions to any issues we find and that community trust in law enforcement can be restored and maintained,” he said. Holder drove home this point, saying that the investigation would be conducted “so we can move forward as expeditiously as possible to restore trust, rebuild understanding, and foster cooperation between law enforcement and community members.”

Regarding the Constitution, Holder, the lawyer-in-chief, said, “The Department of Justice will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that the Constitution has meaning for all communities.”

Holder’s comments make two things clear.

One, he, and the Obama Administration, have launched this investigation to improve the image of and increase public trust in the police. In other words, it is a naked public relations move to hoodwink sections of the population into thinking that the state is a neutral mediator that defends the interests of everyone through legal trial and investigation.

Two, the Obama Administration does not hold the Constitution as guaranteeing certain basic rights to the American people, despite the clear language of the Bill of Rights. Rather, Holder amorphously casts the Constitution, which includes the right to peacefully assemble, as something that ought to “have meaning.” In this context, it becomes evident who gets to decide what “meaning” the Constitution has for the general population.

For instance, in 2012, Holder had the privilege of deciding the “meaning” of the Constitution in relationship to state assassinations. Holder stated, referring to the Obama Administration’s extra-judicial killing of US citizens, “United States citizenship alone does not make such individuals immune from being targeted.”

Holder goes on to clarify who gets to decide when citizenship matters and when it does not matter. He states, “Due process’ and ‘judicial process’ are not one and the same, particularly when it comes to national security. The Constitution guarantees due process, not judicial process.” Put cleanly: the executive branch calls the shots on which American citizens may be killed and which may not.

The DOJ’s investigation does not concern itself with the police crackdown following Brown’s murder, nor the nationwide phenomenon of police violence against workers and youth from all ethnic backgrounds. Instead it will more selectively focus on “discriminatory policing” in the Ferguson Police Department.

Insofar as the investigation exclusively focuses on racial discrimination, it will be part and parcel of the Democratic Party’s effort to funnel outrage over Brown’s assassination and the police crackdown back into the safe channels of identity politics, where political operators like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson work to defuse the class issues. This is the political establishment’s second tactic for dealing with “civil unrest.”

While Brown’s killing may have been racially motivated, and racism is bred in police departments throughout the United States, the fundamental reason behind the mass militarization of the country’s police departments and the unending stream of police violence is the breakdown of the capitalist system and a resultant sharpening of class antagonisms.

The US military has no confusion about this. In a

document entitled “Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a complex and uncertain future,” released in June by the Army’s Strategic Studies group, the authors warn that “radical income disparity” is the “driver of [political] instability.”

“As inequality between rich and poor increases,” the report explains, “[Economic] stagnation will coexist with unprecedented development, as slums and shanty towns rapidly expand alongside modern high-rises. This is the urban future.”

Predicting that it is “highly likely that megacities [described as metropolitan areas with populations of more than 10 million] will be the strategic key terrain in any future crisis that requires U.S. military intervention,” the report reveals that the Pentagon has conducted “case studies” and “field work” in preparation for such interventions in: Dhaka, Bangladesh; Lagos, Nigeria; Bangkok, Thailand; Mexico City, Mexico; Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil ... and New York City.

It is within the context of the US military preparing for direct intervention in US cities, attempting to quell mass unrest caused by economic crisis, that Holder, Obama and the entire US political establishment seek to limit any discussion of Ferguson to the question of race.

The outcome of this identity-based politics can be seen in Detroit. One of the poorest major cities in America, Detroit has a large African American population. Residents are constantly the victims of police violence and intimidation. The police force is also overwhelmingly black.

Workers from every background are the target of increasing police violence and police militarization. What characterizes the victims of police violence nationwide, and internationally, is that they are overwhelmingly poor. The military is conscious of this fact, and as the economic situation deteriorates internationally, the political establishment will use whatever tactics it can to prevent an organized, undivided response from workers.



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