

Meeting at University of Michigan connects police violence to imperialist war

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Dozens of students, workers, and youth attended a meeting at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor Thursday night to discuss the significance of the August 9 police killing and subsequent repression of protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

Titled “Military-police violence in Ferguson, Missouri: The war comes home” and hosted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the meeting took up the interconnections between increasing police brutality and attacks on living conditions and democratic rights in the US and the escalating geopolitical tensions and military predations of American imperialism internationally.

IYSSE National Secretary Andre Damon presented a review of the sequence of events, beginning with the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old, on a residential street of Ferguson. Damon noted that police officer Darren Wilson shot Brown at least six times, including twice in the head. Brown’s body was left to bleed out in the street for hours. Meanwhile, police prohibited horrified family members and neighbors from approaching his body. Protesters who assembled that day and in the subsequent week were met with a massive police mobilization, imposition of virtual martial law, assault weapons, tear gas, and mass arrests.

Damon explained that while he was in Ferguson to report on developments for the *World Socialist Web Site*, the media headlines tended to concentrate on either Ferguson or the renewed US military offensive in Iraq. “Many people we spoke to in Ferguson made a connection between the two,” he stated. “There was a recognition of the war abroad and ‘a war at home.’”

When the National Guard was called in to take over the role of the police on August 19, Damon explained, it was done with the full support of the Obama

administration. “The Obama administration sought to bring the protests to an end through the arrests of hundreds of peaceful protesters,” he said. “The White House also sent in Attorney General Eric Holder and Ron Johnson of the Missouri State Highway Patrol, putting African Americans in charge.”

In the context of the lockdown following the Boston Marathon bombings last year, “a test case meant to acclimate the population to the presence of a standing army,” along with spying on the communications of the population and the president’s drone assassination program, Damon noted that the Obama administration has “justified and encouraged” the militarization of local police departments. The unraveling economic situation and spiraling inequality were behind the policies, he explained, citing figures on food insecurity, a sharp increase in food stamp use, and poverty. “The America of the Obama administration is a country in which economic polarization is extraordinary,” he said.

Pointing to the doubling of wealth among the world’s billionaires in the period since 2009, Damon explained that the two poles of economic existence were “really part of the same process. You get a sense of what the ruling class is really defending.” This process is what is driving the ruling classes of every country, but above all in the United States, toward dictatorial forms of rule and another world war.

A question and discussion session followed the presentation, with attendees asking questions about the tracking of police killings, the role of the Democratic Party in containing the protests, and the attitude of the IYSSE toward other political organizations.

A student, playing devil’s advocate, asked about the response of the government. “When the police started to participate in the protests,” he said, “the protests seemed to go away. Is it because the public felt their

demands had been met?”

“I think what you’re asking is: What did the Democrats do? How does the Democratic Party operate?” Damon responded. “Bill Clinton said, ‘I feel your pain’ as he was cutting welfare. The Democrats sent in Johnson and Holder. Holder said, ‘I am also a black man.’ Fundamentally, your question points to the limitations of the protests themselves,” he stated.

“People were outraged about what was happening. But they didn’t have an alternative political perspective. Even Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were denounced on the streets. There was anger, very justifiably, at the Obama administration and the Justice Department. But what was not there was a political perspective,” Damon said. “The Democrats are now using the question of police violence as an election year issue. But there is a difference between talk, appearance and actual policies. In reality, the whole system functions on lies, and all the politicians are professional liars.”

The WSWs spoke to attendees after the meeting.

“I found the presentation extremely informative and insightful,” said Jallicia Jolly, a doctoral student at the university. “It is nice to hear the perspective of someone who was there on the ground, and who also made the connection of what happened in Ferguson to the war globally.”

“There is a need to expose humanity to the social and economic causes,” Jallicia added. “It is noble, particularly in the US, and it is difficult, to mobilize and unify people. But the fact that the socialists are doing this work keeps me hopeful about the future of humanity.”

Adam, a law student, said he attended because “I was interested in hearing from someone who was actually in Ferguson. There were conflicting reports on what happened—some said these were peaceful protests, others said there were rioters, others said police were shooting at people. I wanted to get a better sense of what took place.”

“The speaker mentioned the Boston lockdown,” he continued. “While that was slightly different because there was a violent terrorist act that precipitated those events, in Ferguson there was no violent act, no terrorists. In fact, here it was the police that were committing the violence. The protests did seem peaceful and they were met with this authoritative

military-like response, and it does seem to highlight a shift in things.... When we think of the Civil Rights movement and the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., advocating nonviolence and peaceful protest—well Ferguson is very important, because here you had peaceful protests met with a totally disproportionate police response.”

When asked about the larger attack on democratic rights, including the NSA spying, Adam noted, “When it is exposed that the NSA was spying on Germany, and the German government then openly says it will now start spying on the US in return, it shows there is a lot of distrust in the world, among governments. It’s troubling. And here—where our country is supposed to be the model example for democratic rights—when you’re willing to trample all over these rights, that is no example at all.”



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