

Race, class and police violence in America

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Four months ago today, Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Popular anger over yet another police murder in the United States has only deepened in the weeks and months since, fueled by the decisions of highly manipulated grand juries not to charge the police officer who killed Brown or the police officer who choked to death Eric Garner in Staten Island last July.

The response of the ruling class to these events has run along two interconnected channels. On the one hand, the protests have been utilized as an opportunity to build up the apparatus of repression even further, including the declaration of a preemptive state of emergency in Ferguson last month and the deployment of the National Guard against protests.

At the same time, the ruling elite is mobilizing the practitioners of identity politics, whose job is to insist that the killing of Brown and Garner, and the exoneration of the police officers who killed them, are entirely the result of racism. The aim is to obscure the fundamental class issues involved and maintain the political authority of the very state apparatus that is responsible for repression and violence throughout the country.

Obama himself took the lead in an interview aired yesterday on Black Entertainment Television. Feigning sympathy for the protesters, Obama urged “patience” and “persistence.” Racism, he said, “is deeply rooted in our society, it’s deeply rooted in our history.”

Seeking to leverage the fact that he is the country’s first African American president, Obama said that the issue “is not only personal for me, because of who I am and who Michelle is and who our family members are and what our experiences are, but as president, I consider this to be one of the most important issues we face.” He added, “America works when everybody feels as if they are being treated fairly.”

Obama added that the outcome of the Garner case, in particular, “gives us the opportunity to have the conversation [on race] that has been a long way coming.”

As always, the president’s comments were shot through

with hypocrisy and deceit. The homilies about everyone being “treated fairly” were delivered by a president who has made sure that no punishment was meted out to the financial swindlers who caused the Wall Street crash or the CIA and Bush administration officials who oversaw and carried out torture.

As for the pretense of concern over police brutality, Obama made his position absolutely clear last week when the White House announced there would be no let-up in the programs that funnel billions of dollars in military equipment to local police forces throughout the country.

In presenting himself as a supporter of those protesting police violence, Obama seeks to exploit his racial background, an effort that is buttressed by a network of lavishly paid political scoundrels such as Al Sharpton, the multi-millionaire former FBI informant who invariably anoints himself the leader of every protest against police brutality. After meeting with the president last week, Sharpton called for a march in Washington next weekend aimed at directing popular anger over police violence into the harmless channel of appeals to Congress and the Obama administration.

These maneuvers have been accompanied by a series of articles in the “left” media insisting that the fundamental issue in the killing of Garner and Brown is “white supremacy” (in the words of one *Rolling Stone* article), “white privilege” and racial oppression.

One of the foulest pieces was penned by Rutgers University Professor Brittney Cooper and published on Salon.com. In “White America’s scary delusion: Why its sense of black humanity is so skewed,” Cooper denounces the “ignorance and lack of empathy” of “white folks,” who benefit from “the violence at the core of the ideology of whiteness.”

From the International Socialist Organization, the basic line is the same. In “When racism wears a badge,” the ISO’s Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes of the “terrorism that pervades Black and Brown communities,” and of a racist system that has “criminalized and impoverished African Americans.” While Taylor refers to “black” and

“African American” more than 30 times, the word “class” does not appear. As for Obama, he is mentioned only to criticize him for not sufficiently focusing on questions of race.

These people have an agenda. It is to encourage divisions along racial lines within the working class. According to them, the basic problem is not capitalism, a system based on class exploitation and oppression, of which racial discrimination is one expression, but rather a hatred of blacks that is somehow built into the genetic code of white people. On this basis it is a natural and inevitable progression to support black Democrats and their bourgeois allies and oppose an independent and united movement of the working class against the entire political establishment.

This is not to deny the existence of racism, which is encouraged among the more backward layers recruited into the police. Yet the violence directed at Brown, Garner and countless other workers and youth is far more about socio-economic class than about race. While African Americans are disproportionately the targets of police killings, white workers and youth still comprise the majority of victims. It is often black police commissioners and black mayors—and even black presidents—who oversee the oppression of minority youth.

The insistence, bordering on hysteria, with which political forces around the Democratic Party proclaim race to be the fundamental social category in America is proportional to the degree this brand of politics is being discredited—particularly by the experience of the Obama administration itself.

Obama, promoted by the likes of the *Nation* and the ISO as the “transformative candidate” six years ago, has presided over a historic reversal in the living conditions of workers of all races. Well into the Obama administration’s supposed “recovery,” social inequality in the United States is higher than at any point since the Great Depression of the 1930s, thanks to the massive transfer of wealth to Wall Street it has engineered.

Social polarization has grown the most among African Americans and other ethnic minorities, with the great majority suffering a decline in living standards and a small elite growing wealthy from programs such as affirmative action and their incorporation into the political and corporate establishment. Obama is, in fact, the embodiment of this corrupt and reactionary social layer.

In Detroit, which is overwhelmingly African American, an African American emergency manager, working closely with the Obama administration, has overseen the

plundering of the city in the interests of the financial aristocracy, including huge cuts in the pensions and health benefits of active and retired city workers. Wages for the working class as a whole, and particularly industrial workers, have plummeted. Public schools and social infrastructure have been relentlessly attacked.

All of this has an impact on popular consciousness, encouraging the understanding that it is class, not race, which determines government policy. The identity politics that has become a mainstay of bourgeois rule in the United States over the past four decades has suffered a severe blow. The likes of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, and the milieu of political organizations rooted in identity politics and based on affluent layers of the upper-middle class, are themselves increasingly despised.

The driving force behind the eruption of police violence in the United States is class oppression. The combination of imperialist war abroad and social counterrevolution at home is expressed politically in the erection of a police state apparatus directed ever more openly against social and political opposition within the United States.

The conflict between the financial aristocracy and the working class is the fundamental source of the brutality and violence of the state. The same conflict creates the objective foundation for a political movement that can put an end to this brutality: an independent and united movement of the entire working class, in opposition to capitalism and all of its political defenders.



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