

Police murders and the criminalization of protest in America

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31 January 2015

On Friday, New York Police Department Commissioner William J. Bratton announced the formation of a 350-member paramilitary police unit specializing in “disorder control and counter-terrorism.” Bratton made clear the new unit would be used to crack down on political opposition.

In his announcement, Bratton explicitly equated peaceful protests, protected under the First Amendment of the US constitution, with acts of terrorism and mass murder. The commissioner said the new unit will be “designed for dealing with events like our recent protests, or incidents like Mumbai or what just happened in Paris,” referring to the 2008 Mumbai, India attacks that killed 164 people and the recent shooting of 11 people at the offices of the French weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

The police commissioner made clear that members of the unit would be heavily armed. “Long rifles and machine guns... are unfortunately sometimes necessary,” he said.

The announcement by Bratton, speaking for the Democratic administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, makes clear that the official response to peaceful protests in Ferguson, Missouri and other cities is not to rein in police violence, but to intensify it, along with a further militarization of the police to deal with the broader social and political unrest to come.

Political dissent in America is being criminalized, especially opposition to the forces of repression themselves—the police, military and intelligence agencies.

Bratton’s announcement comes in the midst of a counteroffensive by police in New York and nationally against any opposition to police violence, which has taken scores of lives in the past year.

The past two weeks have seen some of the most

appalling police shootings in recent memory. On Monday, a Denver police officer gunned down 16-year-old Jessica Hernandez as she was sitting in a car with her friends.

On Wednesday, police released footage of the January 22 shooting of 17-year-old Kristiana Coignard in a Texas police station, showing that officers made no significant effort to subdue her using non-lethal methods, and failed to give her medical aid after shooting her a half-dozen times.

The same day, the Wayne County Prosecutor announced that she was dropping charges against the Detroit police officer who killed 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones in 2010. This followed further police shootings last month in St. Louis, Missouri and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The escalation of police violence has been the direct and premeditated result of policies undertaken at every level of government to shield killer cops from prosecution. On January 21, the *New York Times* reported that the Justice Department would not bring civil rights charges against Darren Wilson, the Ferguson policeman who shot and killed unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown last August. The department was merely waiting for the right time to make the announcement, the newspaper said.

This action follows the decision of the Ferguson grand jury last November not to indict Wilson. It is all the more egregious given the fact that St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Robert P. McCulloch has since admitted that he knowingly presented to the grand jury perjured testimony favorable to Wilson.

After the decision in St. Louis, a grand jury in New York City ruled December 3 that it would not bring charges against Daniel Pantaleo, who choked Staten Island resident Eric Garner to death on July 17. Protests

erupted in New York and other cities.

Less than two weeks later, the killing of two New York City police officers by a mentally unstable man were seized upon by the entire state apparatus, from the local to the federal level, to circle the wagons around the corrupt and hated New York Police Department, and to declare political protests against police violence to be tantamount to inciting murder.

In a gesture of solidarity with the New York Police Department, which was in near-mutiny against the city's civilian administration, Vice President Joe Biden attended the funerals of the two officers, while New York City Mayor de Blasio called for an end to protests against police violence.

The militarization of local police, which erupted into public view last year in Ferguson, is part of the buildup of police state measures since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, including the Patriot Act, mass surveillance of the Internet and telecommunications, military tribunals, indefinite detention without charges or trials, and the use of drones, secret prisons and torture.

All of these methods, developed under the guise of the "war on terror" overseas, are being increasingly applied against domestic political opposition to war, inequality and police violence. The war on terror has come home.

The creation of increasingly dictatorial, police state forms of rule is the response of the capitalist ruling class to an economic, social and political crisis for which it has no solution besides war and repression. These measures make clear that the American ruling elite will respond to any significant political opposition with overwhelming brutality.

To the extent that the wave of police violence and murder is even acknowledged in the US media, it is presented as a question of race and "community relations." In fact, the target of the police state apparatus being built up in the United States is the working class, which creates all of society's wealth but whose living standards are collapsing, even as the wealth of the super-rich continues to soar.



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