

The police murder in Baltimore

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On April 12, 25-year-old Freddie Gray “made eye contact” with a Baltimore police officer; a week later he was dead from an episode of brutality and torture that left three of his vertebrae crushed and his spinal cord mostly severed.

A bystander video, depicting only part of the man’s ordeal, shows a stony-faced group of police officers loading Gray, who is visibly injured and crying out in pain, into a small steel cage in the back of a police van. Thirty minutes later, he arrived at a hospital on the edge of death.

Prior to the beginning of the video, bystanders said that police officers subjected Gray to what can only be described as a horrific form of torture in which he was “folded up like he was...a piece of origami,” with his heels on his back, leaving him praying for medical assistance and unable to walk.

Subsequent press reports have revealed that giving shackled prisoners a “rough ride” inside small, steel-caged police vans is a form of “touchless torture” used by police in Baltimore, Philadelphia and other cities.

Baltimore has a long history of police brutality, which has resulted in \$5.7 million in payouts to victims since 2011. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that “Victims include a 15-year-old boy riding a dirt bike, a 26-year-old pregnant accountant who had witnessed a beating, a 50-year-old woman selling church raffle tickets, a 65-year-old church deacon rolling a cigarette and an 87-year-old grandmother aiding her wounded grandson.”

The killing of Gray is reminiscent of a 2005 police murder in the city, in which Dondi Johnson had his spine fractured after he was given an intentional “rough ride” in a police van that arrived at the station in half the time it would have taken if it were driving at the speed limit. His family received a \$7.4 million judgment, which was subsequently reduced to \$200,000.

In both cases, police were forced to admit that, contrary to protocol, they did not use seat belts to restrain the handcuffed prisoners. The city of Philadelphia has paid more than \$2 million to settle lawsuits alleging that “rough rides” left two people paralyzed.

The homicidal character of the police officers’ actions underscores a fundamental reality of American life: in working-class neighborhoods throughout the United States, the police function as de facto death squads, treating workers and youth as an occupied population, to be put down with arbitrary violence and even murder.

The antisocial views promoted among the increasingly militarized police were reflected in the revelation this week that the National Guard officers overseeing the crackdown in Ferguson, Missouri referred in official documents to peaceful protestors engaging in their constitutionally protected right to free speech as “enemy forces.”

These conceptions, and the murderous actions that accompany them, are the expression of a society deeply corrupted by vast levels of poverty and social inequality, in which the police increasingly see themselves as the “thin blue line” separating the impoverished masses from the financial oligarchy that has enriched itself fabulously at the expense of the population.

Baltimore is emblematic of the enormous decay and deterioration of working-class living standards over the past several decades, leading its population to drop by nearly a third.

Since 1970 the city has lost more than 84 percent of its manufacturing jobs, while the official poverty rate has hit more than 25 percent. The beginning of this year saw the demolition of the towering L Blast Furnace, once the heart of the Bethlehem Steel mill at Sparrows Point, which employed thousands of workers over the

course of a century.

Baltimore's affluent city center, containing a world-class university and hospital system, is ringed by scenes of abject poverty; whole neighborhoods of burned-out and abandoned row houses, with tens of thousands in poverty.

Conditions of social misery are accompanied by extraordinarily brutal and repressive policies directed against the city's poor. Last year, Baltimore enacted a law fining the parents of children who violate the city's 9:00 PM curfew up to \$500. Advocates for the homeless denounced the curfew, which allows police to detain any young person caught outside after hours, saying it will push the city's 2,400 homeless youth "farther into the shadows."

In perhaps the most draconian attack on the city's population, the city administration last month announced that it would begin shutting off water to as many as 25,000 poor residents, triggering protests.

These egregious attacks on the social rights of the population take place in a city where the mayor, police commissioner, and the majority of city council members are African American, and which has been run by the Democratic Party for decades, exploding the claim that electing minority candidates of this big-business party is a means to improve the lot of workers.

The mass protests that have erupted following Gray's murder are particularly significant in that they express the growing opposition by broad sections of the working class to this affluent black elite, which has racked up its own wealth and power while poverty has soared among minority workers.

The brutality meted out against the population of Baltimore, both by the police and politicians, is a concentrated expression of the assault on the working class that has taken place nationwide, resulting in an enormous collapse in living standards and the effective halving of wages for manufacturing jobs.

The growth of poverty and social inequality has been accompanied by the militarization of the police, which has been coordinated at the highest level of the state by the Obama administration. Even while categorically refusing to even track police killings on the national level, the Obama White House has transferred billions of dollars in military hardware to local police. The White House has repeatedly refused to bring federal charges against killer cops, including former Ferguson

police officer Darren Wilson, the killer of unarmed teenager Michael Brown.

Earlier this week, the *Washington Post* reported that despite its claims of sympathy for the victims of police violence, "at the Supreme Court... [the Obama administration's] Justice Department has supported police officers every time an excessive-force case has made its way to arguments."

While thousands of people have been killed at the hands of police over the past decade, only 54 officers have been charged for killing people in the line of duty, of whom only 11 were convicted, receiving mostly wrist-slap sentences.

War, inequality and dictatorship are the inevitable products of the capitalist system. The defense of democratic rights, including freedom from police violence, is inseparable from the struggle to overthrow this corrupt and brutal social order, and establish a genuinely egalitarian form of society—socialism.



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