

Democrats step up repression against protests over police killing of Freddie Gray

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27 April 2015

Thirty-four people were arrested and six police officers were injured over the weekend after thousands marched against police brutality through downtown Baltimore, Maryland. The protest on Saturday was held nearly a week after Freddie Gray, a young African-American man, died from injuries sustained after being beaten by police in west Baltimore.

The protest, called by a coalition of local activist groups, was largely peaceful. It was the largest in a series of demonstrations against police violence that have swept the city since Gray succumbed to his injuries last week.

On Sunday, thousands of people attended a wake for Gray, who will be buried today.

A group of protesters broke away from the main march on Saturday and carried out minor acts of vandalism to storefronts and police vehicles. Police responded by sending helmeted officers to detain protesters and break up the march. Clashes between protesters and police continued throughout the night in parts of west Baltimore, near the area where Gray was beaten and killed.

The number of police flooding the streets over the weekend approached the number of demonstrators. Baltimore Police Chief Anthony W. Batts mobilized over 1,200 cops. He made the ludicrous claim that deploying police across the city would safeguard the protesters' right of "peaceful expression."

On Saturday night, a photographer from the *Baltimore City Paper* was arrested and beaten by police in front of the Western District Police Station. "They mobilized," photographer J.M. Giordano said of the ordeal as he and a bystander were swept up by heavily armed police. "They just swarmed over me... I got hit. My head hit the ground. They were hitting me, then someone pulled me out," he said.

Sait Serkan Gurbuz, a photojournalist for Reuters, was arrested by police at the same time.

Freddie Gray was beaten by Baltimore police April 12 after reportedly making eye contact with an officer and then fleeing. Six policemen gave chase and restrained the youth in a position that severely injured his spine. Gray was then tossed into the back of a police van and driven across town, unrestrained by a safety belt, for over half an hour, before being given medical help. The city has refused to release the names of the police officers involved, while suspending each with pay, pending an investigation.

At the protest on Saturday, representatives of local activist groups tied to the Democratic Party took turns making explicit appeals to leading Democratic politicians. Malik Z. Shabazz, head of one of the event's organizers, Black Lawyers for Justice, appealed to Barack Obama and US Attorney General Eric Holder, and called on Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee for the 2016 presidential election, to come and address her "black Democratic voters" on the march.

Democratic Party officials, however, took the lead in praising the police. "I think they are doing the best they can under the circumstances," said US Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, adding that the march had been disturbed by a "few people, mainly from out of town."

The Baltimore Police Department issued a statement declaring, "While the vast majority of arrests reflect local residency, the total number of arrests does not account for every incident of criminal activity," adding that the department "believes that outside agitators continue to be the instigators behind acts of violence and destruction."

The claim that so-called disturbances of the peace are the work of "outside agitators" has been used by

authorities against protest movements dating back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The use of the term by African-American politicians and so-called “civil rights” leaders active within the milieu of the Democratic Party signals that the city’s black political establishment, no less than white officials of a past era, are preparing a wave of repression.

The disconnect between the political line of the organizers and those protesting police violence was clear in discussions held with those at the march. One resident of the west Baltimore district where Freddie Gray was murdered told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the police were “a gang in blue,” and that any investigation by the federal government into the circumstances of the man’s death would only be a “cover-up.” (See: “Baltimore residents speak out against police killing”).

Another Baltimore resident said, “If you are not totally subservient to them [the police], they will escalate the situation... this is a part of the plan to militarize the country and intimidate the population.”

Last Tuesday, the Justice Department said it would open a federal investigation into Gray’s death, following an open letter from Senators Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin, as well as Cummings and two other congressmen, Dutch Ruppersberger and John Sarbanes. The five Democrats suggested that such a move would “restore public confidence in the Baltimore Police Department.”

This follows the trend of other Justice Department investigations into police violence in places such as Ferguson, Missouri; Cleveland, Ohio; Albuquerque, New Mexico and elsewhere that reveal a record of systemic police corruption and brutality but result in no criminal prosecutions or serious action to halt the abuse.

The Obama administration is fully complicit in the reign of police violence in the United States. The *Washington Post* noted last week 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.”

The administration has set records in its efforts to militarize law enforcement agencies through programs such as the Department of Defense’s 1033 program, which over the past four years has distributed record

amounts of military equipment to local police forces.



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