

National Guard deployed in Baltimore after anger erupts over police killing

Jerry White
28 April 2015

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency in Baltimore and activated 5,000 National Guard troops Monday evening after popular anger erupted in the city over police violence and poverty. Baltimore, with a population of 620,000, is located only 40 miles from the US capital, Washington, DC.

Hundreds of high school youth walked out of school Monday and joined protests over the police murder of 25-year-old Freddie Gray, who died April 19 after suffering fatal spine injuries at the hands of the police. The unarmed man was arrested on April 12 for making eye contact with a police officer and allegedly running away. After being tackled by six officers, thrown into a police van and denied medical assistance, Gray fell into a coma and succumbed a week later.

The anger of the youth and others boiled over following Gray's funeral, which was held earlier on Monday.

In announcing the state of emergency, Governor Hogan, a Republican, said he had spoken with President Obama, who strongly endorsed the deployment of troops and agreed that "we absolutely need to take control of our streets."

Earlier in the evening, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Baltimore's African-American Democratic Party mayor, denounced protesters as "thugs who only want to incite violence and destroy the city." She promised that police and media video tapes would be reviewed and those responsible for violence would be "held accountable."

Rawlings-Blake said she had requested the deployment of National Guard troops and announced a citywide 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew, to begin on Tuesday.

City Council president Jack Young added, "These are thugs who are seizing the opportunity to show anger and distrust toward the police."

The inflammatory language of Rawlings-Blake and Young, echoed by virtually every other local and state official who spoke to the press, exposed the immense gulf that separates the city's privileged elite, black and white, from the masses of youth and workers. These remarks make clear that the murderous actions of the police reflect the hatred and contempt for the working class felt by the entire political establishment of the city.

The protests began just blocks from the West Baltimore church where Gray's funeral was held. In scenes reminiscent of last year's lockdown of Ferguson, Missouri, militarized police with riot shields, backed by tactical armored vehicles and helicopters, fired tear gas and rubber bullets at youth who responded with rocks and sticks.

Phalanxes of riot police blocked streets and occupied intersections in the city's impoverished working class neighborhoods.

The local and national news media seized on incidences of property damage to brand protesters as "looters" and "violent rioters" and demanded an even more severe crackdown. CNN "legal expert" Jeffrey Toobin denounced the "incompetent" response of the mayor and police chief. "Hour after hour, they allowed looting to continue in an uncontrolled way, with no police presence," he complained. The lesson of Ferguson was that the National Guard could not stay in the background, but had to take control of the streets, CNN reporter Don Lemon insisted.

News reports invariably described injuries suffered by police officers, but not those inflicted on protesters by police firing pepper balls and tear gas and wielding police batons. As of Monday evening, at least 30 people had been arrested.

The appearance at the funeral of low-level Obama

administration officials and discredited figures such as Jesse Jackson, along with promises of yet another Justice Department investigation, could not prevent the explosion of social opposition.

Police brutality was the immediate catalyst, but popular anger was fueled by wider causes, above all, deeply entrenched poverty and social inequality.

After decades of deindustrialization, including the demolition of steel mills and auto plants, conditions for the majority of young people are on a par with, or even worse than those in Third World countries. A study of adolescents in low-income neighborhoods conducted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that youth in Baltimore fare worse, in terms of mental health problems, drug abuse, sexual violence and teen pregnancy, than their counterparts in Nigeria.

While certain parts of Baltimore have been gentrified for the wealthy elite that runs the city, the Democratic Party-controlled administration is carrying out austerity measures against the majority of the city's inhabitants. Last month, residents protested the decision of the city to begin cutting off water to thousands of households that are behind in their water payments.

Incidents such as the events in Baltimore and Ferguson reveal at once the real state of class relations not just in these cities, but across the United States. If social opposition takes the form of riots, it is because there is no outlet within the political system, dominated by two right-wing, corporate-controlled parties, for it to find expression.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact