

The social eruption in Baltimore, Maryland

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The eruption of mass anger in Baltimore, Maryland over the police murder of Freddie Gray, and the subsequent military-police takeover of the city, have once again revealed the reality of social life in America. The United States is a seething cauldron of social discontent, over which a frightened and isolated ruling class rules ever more nakedly through the methods of violence and repression.

Two thousand National Guard troops, many of whom were previously deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, have poured into one of America's largest cities, only 40 miles from the nation's capital. A curfew has been imposed, and anyone found after dark without a driver's license and a document from their employer attesting to the fact that they work after hours will be arrested.

The entire political and media establishment has seized on the rioting and unrest following the funeral of Gray to declare their support for the paramilitary occupation of the city. The gamut of opinion represented on the television news ranges from full support for the crackdown to criticism of Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake for not having called in the National Guard earlier.

On Tuesday, President Obama, who has fully backed the crackdown in Baltimore, weighed in with his own remarks, delivered at a press conference announcing a new military agreement with Japan. Obama took the occasion to denounce youth in Baltimore as "criminals and thugs" and said that there is "no excuse for the kind of violence that we saw yesterday." He added that the violence "robs jobs and opportunity from people in that area."

To say that there is no excuse is to say that there is no reason, that the social eruption in Baltimore is simply the product of "thugs"—a term used ubiquitously by the political and media establishment over the past several days. In fact, the cause of the unrest in Baltimore is not

hard to locate. It is the product of intense anger over poverty, unemployment, social decay and the unending reign of police violence and murder in Baltimore and cities throughout the United States.

For the youth targeted by the police crackdown, there are no "excuses," but for Obama, and the corporate aristocracy and the military-intelligence apparatus that he represents, excuses abound. The United States government is built on a mass of excuses for all the crimes of the ruling class.

Just last week, Obama excused the fact that a drone strike he ordered in January killed two hostages, with the bland declaration, "During the fog of war mistakes happen." There is no shortage of excuses for the hundreds of thousands killed as a result of US military operations.

And there are plenty of excuses for the real criminals in Baltimore: the police, armed to the teeth with military gear provided by the Obama administration. The killing of Gray—an act that has yet to result in any arrests or charges—is only the latest in a long string of daily harassment, brutality and abuse, in Baltimore and throughout the country. Those responsible are almost never held accountable. Following the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri last year, the Obama administration worked closely with local and state officials and prosecutors to ensure that his killer was exonerated.

As for Obama's claims that the actions of youth in Baltimore "robs jobs and opportunity," this comes from the chief representative of a financial aristocracy that has laid havoc to Baltimore and countless other cities.

For decades, the ruling class in America has carried out a policy of deindustrialization, shutting down entire sectors of the economy. Obama himself has presided over the largest transfer of wealth into the pockets of the rich in US history, even as he has overseen the destruction of wages and the decimation of social

services. Since Obama came to office, Baltimore has lost 80 percent of its manufacturing jobs, and thousands of children are homeless and tens of thousands live in poverty.

The events in Baltimore reveal starkly the fraud of identity politics, based on the claim that race, not class, is the fundamental social category in America. Obama's denunciation of young people in Baltimore mirrors that of the entire African-American political apparatus in the city, which has responded to the protests with a combination of hatred, rage and fear.

In her press conference Tuesday, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake repeatedly referred to young people expressing their anger over police violence as "thugs" in announcing the imposition of a curfew and the calling in of the National Guard. She was flanked by Patrol Chief Darryl De Sousa, the City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young, and City Council member Brandon M. Scott, all of whom were black, with the latter two also calling the demonstrators "thugs."

This coming August will mark the 50th Anniversary of the Watts rebellion, a wave of social unrest that engulfed the predominantly African-American neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1965. The Watts rebellion, sparked by an incident of police brutality, was followed in the coming years by a series of uprisings in urban centers throughout the country, including Baltimore.

Two social phenomena characterize the subsequent decades. First, the extraordinary growth of social inequality. The conditions of workers and working-class youth, including African Americans, are worse today than they were a half century ago. Second, the ruling class has integrated into positions of power and privilege a layer of the black upper middle class, which has presided over an economic and cultural catastrophe in city after city.

In its response to the eruption of police violence over the murder of Freddie Gray, the black political establishment, headed by the first African-American president, has shown itself exactly for what it is: corrupt, self-interested and utterly hostile to the interests and aspirations of the poor and workers, black and white.

The fight against police violence is fundamentally a class question. In the methods deployed on the streets

of Baltimore, the ruling class is demonstrating what it is prepared to do in response to all opposition to its policies of war and social counterrevolution.

The eruption of anger in Baltimore, however, is the expression of these sentiments in a form that lacks political direction. Police violence, inequality, poverty and unemployment cannot be ended in this way. This requires a political movement of the entire working class, which must come to the defense of the workers and youth of Baltimore.

The fight against police brutality and murder must be connected to a conscious political mobilization of the working class, independent of the Democratic and Republican Parties, and aimed at the overthrow of capitalism and the reorganization of society on a socialist basis.



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