

Protests grow in Baltimore in defiance of police-military siege

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Thousands of workers and students demonstrated in Baltimore Wednesday, defying the military-police crackdown in the city of 622,000.

Solidarity protests, including those demanding the removal of the National Guard from Baltimore, spread to other cities, including New York City, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Washington, DC.

While the police murder of 25-year-old Freddie Gray was the trigger of social opposition, the outpouring of protests is driven by deeper social causes.

In addition to police violence, angry youth on the streets of Baltimore spoke out against deteriorating schools, impoverished neighborhoods, poverty level jobs and the vast social chasm that has produced “two Baltimores”—one for the rich and powerful, the other for the poor. They complained of the indifference of the political establishment in the city, which has long been dominated by a corrupt layer of African American Democratic Party politicians.

As the immense class tensions that characterize American society are beginning to rise to the surface, the ruling class is responding with violence and repression.

Maryland’s Republican Governor Larry Hogan and Baltimore’s Democratic Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, consulting closely with President Obama, used incidents of looting on Monday night to declare a state of emergency, deploy the National Guard throughout the city, including outside public schools, and impose a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew.

Military humvees monitored protests closely on Wednesday, and police helicopters flew overhead. Meanwhile, police cracked down on solidarity protests involving some 300 demonstrators Tuesday night in Ferguson, Missouri. The St. Louis suburb was the scene of militarized police repression of protests after the

police killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown.

Authorities and the media are seeking to condition the population to accept routine police state measures and the suspension of democratic rights.

Governor Hogan said Wednesday that the National Guard would remain “until the violence ends,” and warned that there were still “Hostility, anger and people who want to make trouble and don’t want to go in a peaceful way.” While state authorities would “permit” protests, the governor declared that the curfew remained in effect.

Expressing the sentiments of many workers and youth in Baltimore, protester April Love told CNN, “The system is corrupt. We have waited too long for them to sweep this murder under the rug. The youth have been forgotten. We vote these politicians in and then they forget about you.”

Another resident noted how outrageous it was for young students to leave Frederick Douglass High School only to be confronted with National Guard troops toting automatic weapons. “These are kids seeing armed guards.” Referring to Mayor Rawlings-Blake, she added, “She is not doing anything for us. She is only worried about making herself look better. Make this city safe. It is already profitable. Make it thrive for us.”

Much of the media coverage Wednesday was characterized by a self-congratulatory tone over the success of the military-police crackdown and the supposed popular support for the dispatch of armed troops.

Nearly 300 people have been arrested since Monday evening, including an estimated 35 after the curfew went into effect Tuesday night. Police are reviewing security and news media videotapes of clashes Monday night, and CNN announced “hundreds more” could be

jailed.

Among the arrests were 35-50 juveniles, including 21 with no prior criminal records, who appeared in court Wednesday shackled with chains on their ankles. One youth told CNN that he felt like he had been caged like an animal. Judges began processing others, demanding \$10-15,000 bonds to post bail.

While the full weight of the criminal justice system is being meted out to impoverished workers and youth—denounced by the mayor and President Obama as “thugs”—the six police officers responsible for Gray’s death have gone uncharged. Much of the popular anger is fueled by anticipation that they will be exonerated like other killer cops across the country.

Authorities said they were lowering expectations about Friday’s pre-announced conclusion of the police department’s internal investigation in Gray’s death. Baltimore Police Department Captain Eric Kowalczyk said Wednesday afternoon that the report would not be released to the public. “We know people want answers but we cannot release all this information to the public. If there is a decision to charge, the integrity of the investigation has to be respected.”

In an effort to preempt protests while making more police forces available to monitor schools and neighborhoods, Baltimore’s professional baseball team held a previously cancelled game Wednesday afternoon in an empty Camden Yards stadium after police banned any public attendance to the game—for the first time in the history of the sport.

Captain Kowalczyk declared Wednesday that police were “monitoring social media” and that “we have resources on the ground where students congregate or are dismissed from school.”

The eruption of mass anger in Baltimore and the subsequent police-military deployment have exposed the fundamental class divide in America—between millions of workers on the one hand, and a corporate and financial aristocracy that controls both big business parties, on the other.

In Baltimore, the Democratic political establishment has starved essential services of funding while handing over large tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy in the name of “improving business climate.” Development has focused on sports, tourist attractions and commercial projects in the downtown and the Inner Harbor areas.

Nearby areas that once contained dockyards, shipbuilding and repair facilities, steel, auto and other manufacturing plants, employing tens of thousands of workers, have long been abandoned along with working class neighborhoods that lack the most basic necessities of life.

Baltimore’s infant mortality rate compares with underdeveloped countries like Belize and Moldova. Freddie Gray’s Sandtown neighborhood has a jobless rate of over 50 percent, a median income of \$24,000—compared to \$40,803 in the city as a whole—and life expectancy of only 68.8 years, according to the Justice Policy Institute and Prison Policy Institute.

A Johns Hopkins study noted that a matter of just six miles—the distance between affluent and poor neighborhoods in the city—means a difference of 20 years in life expectancy.

The ruling class has nothing to offer to address the social catastrophe created by the capitalist system. The corollary to the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich—massively accelerated since the 2008 economic crisis—is the build-up of the instruments of repression in response to the inevitable eruption of class struggle.



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