

Capitalism, the working class and the fight against police violence

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The events in Baltimore, Maryland following the police killing of 25-year-old Freddie Gray mark a political turning point in the United States. The enormous class divide in America, the bankruptcy of the entire political system and the collapse of democratic forms of rule—all have been laid bare by this latest act of state brutality and the military-police mobilization against the eruption of social anger.

In recent days, thousands of people have participated in demonstrations in Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia and other cities throughout the country. Further protests will take place today and over the weekend. While the police violence is the immediate spark, far deeper issues are involved: mass unemployment, poverty, the decay of cities and social infrastructure, and unprecedented levels of social inequality.

The entire political superstructure has responded to the unrest in Baltimore by backing the deployment of thousands of troops from the National Guard, a branch of the armed forces. Baltimore, only 40 miles from the nation's capital, has effectively been occupied, with heavily armed units placed in key public locations throughout the city, accompanied by armored vehicles and military helicopters. A state of emergency has been declared, and a curfew imposed on all residents.

The actions in Baltimore come half a year after the crackdown in Ferguson, Missouri last August, when the city was turned into a war zone in response to demonstrations over the police killing of Michael Brown. The state violence was repeated later in the year, following a rigged grand jury proceeding that exonerated Brown's killer.

The irony is hard to miss. The United States government, which wages war all over the world on the phony pretext of defending "democracy" and "human rights," increasingly relies on the methods of martial law in response to any indication of social unrest within its

borders.

Conditions in Baltimore exemplify the immense social inequality that is the defining feature of American society. As a whole, it is ranked the sixth poorest city in the country. In the Sandtown-Winchester area where Gray was arrested, more than half of the working-age population is unemployed, and a third of all residential properties are vacant or abandoned. A report put out by the city in 2011 found that nearly a third of all families in the neighborhood live in poverty.

To regulate this social catastrophe, the police have been armed to the teeth and given free rein to terrorize the population. Arrests, beatings and harassment are a daily reality. A report by the *Baltimore Sun* last year found that the city paid out \$5.7 million since 2011 over lawsuits related to police violence. "Officers have battered dozens of residents who suffered broken bones—jaws, noses, arms, legs, ankles—head trauma, organ failure, and even death, coming during questionable arrests," the newspaper reported.

While the vast majority of the population in Sandtown-Winchester is African-American, the fundamental division in Baltimore—as in American society as a whole—is class, not race. Like many urban centers, Baltimore is run by a predominantly black political elite, including the mayor, the city council president, the police chief, the top prosecutor and many others. Half of the police force is black as well.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake—who led the charge in denouncing Baltimore youth as "thugs" earlier this week—personifies a layer of the African-American upper middle class that has become part of the Democratic Party political establishment and attained positions of power and privilege. The daughter of a longtime Maryland politician, Rawlings-Blake has worked closely with the city's business elite to develop and gentrify sections of downtown, while areas like West

Baltimore have been laid to waste.

It is now a half century since the wave of urban uprisings that swept the United States in the late 1960s—including in Baltimore and countless other cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968.

The rebellions in the 1960s came during the last gasp of liberal reformism in the United States. Over the past 50 years, the ruling class has gone on the offensive, carrying out a relentless assault on jobs, wages and living standards. Social inequality has soared to levels not seen since before the Great Depression of the 1930s. Cities like Baltimore have been deindustrialized, with entire sectors of the economy wiped out.

To facilitate the war on the working class, the ruling class worked deliberately to integrate a small minority of the African-American middle class into the mechanisms of state power, including through policies such as affirmative action. Meanwhile, conditions for the vast majority of African-American workers and youth are worse today than they were in the 1960s.

Obama himself represents the culmination of this process. The first African-American president has presided over an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the top one percent, unending war abroad and an assault on the most basic democratic rights. Since the economic crisis of 2008, unlimited resources have been funneled to the banks and Wall Street. The stock market and corporate profits are at record highs, while the administration has spearheaded the assault on wages, public education, health care and the conditions of life of the working class as a whole.

Since 2009, nearly all income gains in the United States have been captured by the top one percent of the population, with the 400 wealthiest individuals in the country now controlling a staggering \$2.29 trillion. More than \$600 billion a year is devoted to financing the US military juggernaut, yet in cities like Baltimore and Detroit thousands of households are being shut off from running water, the most basic necessity of modern life.

There are no political mechanisms within the political system through which any of the grievances of the vast majority of the population can find expression. Everything that has passed for “progressive” or “left” politics—including the politics of race—has been exposed by events. It is precisely this that terrifies the ruling class, and explains its ever more direct resort to force and violence.

The rights of the working class can be achieved only

through revolutionary struggle, uniting workers of all races in an independent political movement in opposition to the Democratic and Republican Parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the mobilization of the entire working class in defense of the workers and youth of Baltimore. The same police-state apparatus, trained in Iraq and Afghanistan, that terrorizes the population of Baltimore and has been called out to suppress popular protests is and will be deployed against all opposition to the policies of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

Mass meetings and demonstrations should be organized throughout the country to demand the immediate arrest of Gray’s killers, the lifting of the state of emergency in Baltimore and the withdrawal of the National Guard and the demobilization of the police. These democratic demands should be linked to a program that advances the social rights of the entire working class—including a massive redistribution of wealth to provide decent-paying jobs, education and health care for all.

Nothing can be achieved without a frontal assault on the domination of society by a financial aristocracy that is determined to maintain its stranglehold through violence and terror. Their grip over economic and political life must be broken through the establishment of a society based on public ownership and democratic control of the forces of production. To implement this program, the working class must take political power—in the United States and internationally.

The solution to the crisis confronting workers depends on the construction of an independent, socialist leadership of the working class. It is to build this leadership that the International Committee of the Fourth International has organized the International May Day Online Rally, to be held on Sunday, May 3. We call on all workers and youth to make plans to participate today.



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