

The police murder of Sandra Bland

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The July 13 death of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African-American woman, in an East Texas jail cell has once again brought the issues of police violence and attacks on democratic rights to the forefront of political life in the United States.

At this point, it is unknown precisely how Bland, a vocal opponent of police violence, met her death. But one thing is clear: no credence can be given to anything coming from official channels about the circumstances of her death.

According to the official narrative, the newly employed young woman used a trash bag to hang herself “in a semi-standing position” from a wall partition post not much taller than her own height. Only an hour before she supposedly took this drastic action, she spoke to jail staff about making a phone call. There was, conveniently, no video of the hall leading to her jail cell in the hours before she died—according to police because the cameras are set off by motion detectors.

A comment in the *New York Times* by columnist Charles Blow points to a number of additional discrepancies in the official account, including the fact that video of Bland’s cell after her death shows a trash can with the garbage bag still in it. Moreover, a bible in the cell appears to have been opened to a page referencing suicide sometime *after* Bland was killed.

Bland’s family immediately rejected any possibility that Bland had committed suicide, noting that she was excited about her new job. Adding to the uncertainty surrounding the case was the revelation yesterday of glitches in the official dashboard camera video depicting Bland’s arrest, which Texas officials attributed to technical errors.

Whatever the physical cause of her death, criminal responsibility lies with the police. On July 10, Bland was driving in her car to begin a new job when she was stopped by a cop who threatened and brutalized her,

and then arrested her without cause. The actions of this officer set into motion a series of events that ended in her death three days later.

The video footage that does exist of Bland’s arrest provides a picture of the daily outrages perpetrated by police in the United States. The young woman was stopped for a minor traffic infraction—supposedly failing to use her turn signal. When she questioned demands from police officer Brian Encinia to put out her cigarette (an unlawful demand), she was ordered out of the car. When she protested this outrageous treatment, she was threatened with a Taser by Encinia, who yelled, “I will light you up!”

After being forced out of the car, Bland was told by Encinia that she was under arrest. When she sought to use her phone to record the incident and asked what she was being arrested for, Encinia brutally attacked her. In a cell phone video, Bland is heard complaining loudly that her face had been slammed into the ground.

Given the vast amount of information available to police on the political views and activities of the American population, it is likely that Encinia had at his disposal records indicating Bland’s vocal opposition on social media to police violence and her likely participation in protests against police killings. The video shows the officer taking a more provocative tone after checking her license and looking up her records in his squad car. The episode leaves the distinct impression that Bland was deliberately targeted for her political views.

In line with the standard *modus operandi* of US police departments, Encinia has not been charged with any crime. He has merely been consigned to desk duty.

Sandra Bland’s death is impossible to understand apart from its context: three decades of social counterrevolution in America, accompanied by the militarization of the police and the integration of police departments into what has come to be called the “total

army.”

The evolution of the police into heavily-armed occupation forces in working-class communities is a central feature of the domination of political reaction over all aspects of US society. Over this period, the methods employed by the US military in its wars abroad have been used ever more directly to deal with explosive social tensions within the United States.

Thuggish actions such as those carried out by Encinia are deliberately encouraged in America’s police forces, which attract the most backward and violent social elements. This type of brutality is promoted at the highest levels of the state, beginning with the presidency. President Barack Obama boasts of “taking out” alleged terrorists by means of drone assassinations.

Police officers are trained to respond with extreme aggressiveness to any questioning of their authority. When an officer commits an act of violence or even murder, the entire political apparatus springs to his defense. He or she is given the most favorable possible coverage on the news, while prosecutors maneuver to avoid bringing charges.

The Obama administration, while posing as an opponent of excessive force by the police, does everything in its power to prevent the bringing to justice of killer cops.

The White House has not brought federal civil rights charges against officers in any of the high-profile police murders in recent months, including the killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore last April, the murder of Eric Garner in New York City in July of 2014, the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August of last year, and the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland last November. The administration has taken the side of the police every time a police violence case has come before the Supreme Court.

Police in the US have killed 647 people so far this year—an average of more than three per day. This follows the 1,100 deaths in 2014, according to one database.

While thousands of people have been killed at the hands of police over the past decade, only 54 officers have been charged for killing people in the line of duty, of whom only 11 were convicted, receiving mostly wrist-slap sentences, according to a recent analysis by

the *Washington Post*.

The Obama administration has facilitated the militarization of the police, having transferred billions of dollars in military hardware to local police departments. This steady flow of advanced weaponry has continued unabated despite mass protests against police killings over the past year.

The death of Sandra Bland has once again produced popular shock and anger that such things should happen in America. Not only do they happen, they occur with nauseating regularity. Every new killing produces nothing but empty expressions of concern and self-serving rationalizations by the political establishment. No one is held to account. Nothing is done to prevent such outrages from happening again.

The daily horror of police violence in the US is one of the most visible symptoms of a deeply diseased society.



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