

One year since the death of Michael Brown

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Sunday marks the first anniversary of the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager who was shot in cold blood by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The subsequent crackdown against peaceful demonstrators, and the declaration of conditions resembling martial law, set a precedent for the use of militarized police and the National Guard to intimidate and suppress social opposition in the United States.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was walking home from a convenience store around noon in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, when he was stopped by police officer Darren Wilson and told to get out of the street. Witnesses said Wilson tried to grab Brown and pull him into his police car. Brown ran away and was then gunned down.

The majority of witnesses cited in a subsequent report by the federal government said that Brown turned around and put his hands up, some distance from Wilson, after he had been wounded by an initial volley from the officer's gun. Wilson then resumed shooting, including one fatal, downward shot to the top of Brown's head.

The murder of Brown sparked a series of nightly protests in Ferguson involving thousands of people. The police, in turn, responded with an enormous show of militarized violence: Swat teams in combat fatigues, deployed in armored vehicles and bearing loaded assault rifles, shot demonstrators with rubber bullets and pepper spray and carried out mass arrests. The press, in particular, was targeted, with over a dozen journalists arrested.

Even as the Obama administration postured as sympathetic to the victims of police violence, the White House was helping to coordinate the crackdown on demonstrators and prepare the cover-up of Brown's murder.

Just over a week after Brown was killed, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, called out the US

National Guard. Police told demonstrators that they were not allowed to stand still at protest locations, in what a federal Judge subsequently ruled was a violation of the First Amendment. The precedent set in Ferguson was used again this May, when the National Guard was called out against demonstrations following the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland.

Three months after Brown's death, Nixon once again preemptively declared a state of emergency and called out the National Guard ahead of the expected grand jury decision on whether to indict Wilson. One week later, on November 25, St. Louis County prosecuting attorney Robert P. McCulloch announced that the grand jury had decided not to charge the officer. Media revelations subsequently confirmed broad popular suspicions that the grand jury proceeding was a pseudo-legal travesty, and had included testimony that the prosecutor knew to be perjured.

In March of this year, the Obama administration put its stamp of approval on the sham grand jury proceeding by failing to bring federal civil rights charges against Wilson. The Justice Department's report on the shooting declared that the majority of witnesses who said Brown was attempting to surrender were not trustworthy, while the minority that agreed with Wilson's highly suspect story of the events of Brown's killing were "credible."

Simultaneously with the decision to not bring charges against Wilson, the Justice Department released a report documenting the systematic and widespread criminality of the Ferguson Police Department. The report revealed a police force that regularly beat and killed people without cause and funded the city's operations on the basis of abusive and illegal debt collection practices akin to debtors' prisons. No one was criminally charged for the grievous abuses of power revealed in the report.

This marked the consummation of the official

response to the killing of Michael Brown: the murder was covered up, while officials responsible for the most egregious violations of the US Constitution went unpunished. The message was clear: police officers who commit murders and other crimes have impunity. It was open season on working class youth.

America's police forces got the message. Since the death of Michael Brown, over 1,100 people have been killed by the police in the US. Only a tiny fraction of officers involved have been charged with any crime, and even fewer have been convicted.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration refused to put any significant restraints on its programs to militarize local police forces, which have already transferred billions of dollars in military hardware, including armored vehicles and machine guns, to the police. Instead, the militarization of the police has continued and escalated.

The police killing of Michael Brown, and the continued reign of horrific police violence in the United States, are expressions of the enormous class divide in America. Seven years after the 2008 economic crisis, social inequality is greater than ever. The political apparatus is dominated by a corrupt and parasitic financial aristocracy that responds to any sign of social unrest with violence and repression.

In official circles—and this includes the proponents of identity politics that orbit around the Democratic Party—the killing of Brown and other incidents of police brutality are presented entirely within the framework of race. This is a political diversion to conceal the underlying class issues and roots of police repression in the capitalist system itself. Whatever role racism may play in one or another atrocity, police violence targets workers and youth of all races, while the state apparatus in many cities where police killings are routine is headed by African American politicians.

In the unending reign of police violence, which takes an average of three victims every single day, one sees the noxious product of endless war abroad and soaring social inequality at home. The methods pioneered in the US military occupation of Iraq and paramilitary operations by death squads around the world are increasingly being deployed against the population of the United States. The police forces, integrated into the military/intelligence apparatus and armed with military equipment, are trained and encouraged to think like an

occupying army, led by a US president who revels in authorizing drone murders and assassinations.

The military/police occupation of Ferguson revealed to the whole world that behind the outward trappings of democracy in the US, the groundwork for a police state has been created. This is one expression of the deep decay and crisis of American capitalism.



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