

Race, class and police murder in America

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In the aftermath of the mass shooting of police officers in Dallas, Texas Thursday night, the American media and political establishment has sought to portray the police killings of unarmed people and widespread protests against police violence as proof of deepening and unbridgeable racial divisions in the United States.

According to the media presentation, the homicidal actions of police across the country are somehow a manifestation of “white people” expressing their elemental, collective racial hatred of African-Americans.

The *New York Post*, for example, ran a banner headline proclaiming “Civil War,” while the *New York Times* led its Sunday opinions section with a column titled “Divided by Race, United by Pain.”

This presentation is grotesquely at odds with reality. What is taking place in America is not a race war, but rather public protest against police violence in a country where more than a thousand people a year are executed without trial by police forces run amok.

Racism, of course, exists and it may be a factor in many police killings. Blacks are targeted for police attack in numbers disproportionate to their share of the population. But the facts themselves demonstrate that the scourge of police violence and murder is not limited to blacks or minorities, but extends to working people and youth of all races and ethnicities, especially the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class.

According to a database compiled by the *Guardian*, through July 9, 571 people had been killed so far this year by police in the US. The dead included 88 Hispanics and 138 African-Americans, but nearly half—281 people—were white. Last year 1,146 people were killed by the police, of which the majority, 586, were white.

Many of the cops who carry out these murders are themselves members of minority groups. Three of the

six officers charged in the April 2015 killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, an outrage that sparked nationwide demonstrations, were African-American. In that city, as in many others where police brutality is rampant, both the mayor and the police chief were black.

Even the government seems unable to rein in the police. When New York Mayor Bill de Blasio made comments deemed sympathetic to protests against police violence, following the police killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, he faced a virtual insurrection by New York City police.

The claim, made without either factual substantiation or historical explanation, that the United States is suddenly convulsed by sectarian hatred, is a falsehood that does not withstand any serious analysis. It is being promoted as part of a narrative that serves definite political interests.

This presentation conceals the nature of the state and distracts attention from the fundamental questions of social class that are at the root of the relentless exercise of police brutality and murder. The wave of state violence takes place under specific conditions: a deepening economic and social crisis, an immense growth of social inequality, mounting signs of a resurgence of class struggle and a broad process of political radicalization within the American working class.

The number of days lost to major strikes in the US in 2015 was nearly four times that of 2014, and this year, with the month-long strike by Verizon workers, the figure will be far higher still. Even more disturbing to the ruling class, there are mounting signs, including the near-rebellion last year by autoworkers, that the trade union bureaucracy is losing its grip on the working class. And the mass support among workers and especially among youth for the campaign of Bernie Sanders, who describes himself as a socialist and talks of a “political revolution” against the “billionaire

class,” has revealed the widespread growth of anti-capitalist sentiment, to the horror of the ruling elite.

The aim of the campaign to inundate the public with a racist narrative concerning police violence and all other aspects of American society is to divert attention from the capitalist system itself and head off the development of what the ruling class fears most—a broad, popular movement uniting the working class in the struggle against this economic system.

This requires grossly distorting popular attitudes toward race. There have, in fact, been vast changes—generally of a healthy character—since the heyday of Jim Crow segregation in the South and widespread racial discrimination in the North. In the America of the 1930s and 1940s, lynchings of blacks were virtually a daily occurrence. The great mass of African-Americans in the South did not have access to the ballot, and there were virtually no black political representatives.

Fifty years ago, in 1966, Edward Brooke was elected senator from Massachusetts, becoming the first African-American popularly elected to the United States Senate. Police forces throughout the country were almost exclusively white, and intermarriage between blacks and whites was virtually unknown.

These circumstances were radically altered by a 30-year upsurge of the working class between 1934 and 1964, which broke the back of segregation in the South and led to the racial integration of state institutions, including the police and all levels of government. The United States, after all, elected an African-American president in 2008 and reelected him in 2012.

Today, 87 percent of Americans, including 84 percent of whites, say they support interracial marriage, up from 4 percent in 1958. Fifteen percent of all new marriages in 2010 were interracial, more than double the share in 1980.

What really happened last week? The killings of two black men, Alton B. Sterling and Philando Castile, both caught on video, sparked outrage and opposition throughout the United States and internationally. With less publicity but no less chillingly, local media published a video showing police executing Dylan Noble, a 19-year-old white man in Fresno, California, as he lay motionless on the ground. Mass protests by people of all ethnicities throughout the country were met by the arrest of hundreds of demonstrators, carried

out by highly militarized police who look and act like occupation forces.

As for the actions of Micah Johnson, the Dallas shooter, the fact that he himself was killed by means of a bomb-wielding robot—the first incidence of drone-type warfare within the borders of the United States—makes it difficult to determine what his precise motives were.

While it seems that his actions were to some extent motivated by police killings of African-Americans, it is also the case that he was a military veteran who spent nearly a year in Afghanistan. His actions follow the pattern of the dozens of mass shootings, many by military veterans, that take place in the United States every year.

The promotion of a sectarian outlook is embraced by politicians and academics who have a deep and vested interest in racial politics. They generally have nothing but praise for President Obama, who has presided over eight years of unending war, growing social inequality and poverty, and the arming of police departments with military-grade weapons throughout the country. These purveyors of racial politics are indifferent to the social distress of broad sections of the working class and have no proposals to improve their plight.

We urge all workers and youth to reject the reactionary, racist narrative being peddled by the media and political establishment. The struggle against police violence, like all great social questions, requires uniting all sections of the working class in a common struggle against the capitalist system.



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