

The Justice Department's whitewash of police violence in Baltimore, Maryland

Niles Niemuth
12 August 2016

The report by the Obama administration's Department of Justice (DOJ) released this week detailing rampant abuses by the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) is aimed at whitewashing police brutality and killings under the guise of reform.

The practices described by the report are both horrific and far-reaching: routine and unjustified "stop and frisk" searches, including strip searches in public; arrests without cause; racial profiling; physical abuse and unnecessary force; and retaliation against actions protected by free speech. According to the DOJ, the Baltimore police engage "in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the First and Fourth Amendments of the Constitution as well as federal anti-discrimination laws."

That the Baltimore police engage in illegal and unconstitutional actions is hardly surprising. It is a part of the daily harassment and abuse meted out by police forces throughout the United States. The investigation is the latest in a number of reports on other cities (including Cleveland, Ohio; Ferguson, Missouri; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Albuquerque, New Mexico) with similar findings.

As with these earlier reports, the latest investigation does not propose any charges for the violation of core democratic rights. Instead, it announces that the federal government and the City of Baltimore had reached "an agreement in principle" to create "a federal court-enforceable consent decree addressing the deficiencies." In other words, nothing will be done.

In fact, what were uncovered were not "deficiencies," but crimes, crimes for which the Obama administration is implicated no less than the government and police officials in Baltimore. The White House has overseen the militarization of local police forces throughout the country, which kill more than 1,000 people every year,

and has systematically obstructed any efforts to hold anyone accountable.

The "consent agreement" is signed by officials from the Obama DOJ and Baltimore's Democratic Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake and Baltimore Police Commissioner Kevin Davis. The toothless proposals for "sensitivity training" and the like will do nothing to change the character of the police, whose purpose is not to guarantee the safety of one or another "community," but to defend the privileges and wealth of the ruling class. The wanton abuse and killing of workers will continue unabated.

It is no coincidence that the release of the DOJ report comes on the heels the announcement last month that state prosecutors had decided to drop of all charges against the six Baltimore police officers involved in the Freddie Gray killing after failing to convict three of them. Indeed, the investigation was requested by city officials for the purpose of tamping down the social unrest sparked by the police killing of Gray in April 2015.

The report on the Baltimore police also comes two years after protests erupted in Ferguson, Missouri over the killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. Workers and young people must draw definite political conclusions from the experience of the last two years.

Despite protests across the country, police killings continue unabated. According to figures compiled by killedbypolice.net there have been 2,359 police killings in the United States, more than three every day, since the killing of Michael Brown.

Last week, videos were released showing the murder of 18-year-old Paul O'Neal in July by Chicago police. Police officers can be seen shooting wildly into a residential neighborhood as they chase down the young man, who was eventually caught and shot twice in the

back.

Just this week, at least 11 people were gunned down by the police, including 20-year-old Earl Pinckney in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 14-year-old Jesse Romero in Los Angeles, and 44-year-old Jeffery Allen Morris in Piedmont, South Carolina.

In seeking to derail opposition, the central strategy of the ruling class, the political establishment and the media is to present police killings as primarily a matter of racism, of “White America” against “Black America,” rather than of the state against the working class and oppressed.

Indeed, the latest report on Baltimore presents police brutality as fundamentally a problem of racism that can be overcome with stricter oversight by members of the city’s African-American residents. Yet the Baltimore police are highly racially integrated, and the city is largely run by African-American Democrats.

In fact, people of every race, ethnicity and gender in every state have been the victims of police brutality, with the common factor being that they are overwhelmingly poor.

One site, fatalencounters.org, has sought to account for every police killing since 2000, documenting a staggering 14,222 cases. The majority of those killed were white, and nearly every victim of police violence has either been poor or working class. The overwhelming majority of police killings were in areas where the median annual household income is less than \$100,000.

Those affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement have worked to frame the wave of police killings in purely racial terms, pointing to the fact that blacks are killed by police at a disproportionate rate, to argue that American society is riven by racial hostility, obscuring the fundamental class issues. Protests against police violence have been channeled behind the Democratic Party, the party which has overseen the suppression of many of the anti-police violence protests.

The outcome of the policies of those who promote identity politics as a solution the problem of police violence was on full display last month when Baltimore Mayor Rawlings-Blake, an African-American woman who called in the National Guard against protests following the death of Freddie Gray, gaveled in the Democratic National Convention.

The DNC was a spectacle of militarism and a celebration of the police wedded to identity politics of every stripe. At the same time, the Democrats took the opportunity to cynically parade the mothers of young black men killed by police in order to present Hillary Clinton as an opponent of police violence.

Clinton is now running the most right-wing campaign in the history of the Democratic Party, aimed at winning over the military-intelligence apparatus and sections of the Republican Party on a program of war abroad and the defense of the interests of the ruling class at home. Whether Clinton or Trump is elected, the measures being planned will inevitably be accompanied by an ever greater buildup of the police forces as part of the “total army” directed at the suppression of social opposition within the United States.

The unparalleled level of police violence in the United States is rooted in the immense and growing level of social inequality and an economic system, capitalism, that has produced it. Under both Democrats and Republicans, the police have been built up and armed to the teeth in order to defend this economic system, which benefits a tiny minority that sits at the top.

No number of DOJ investigations and community oversight boards will put an end to the brutality of the police and the capitalist system which they defend. Police violence can be confronted only in a struggle by the working class, united across all racial, ethnic and national divisions, against the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact