

The social roots of unrest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Niles Niemuth
16 August 2016

Once again deeply rooted social anger has boiled over in an American city against police violence. This time protests erupted in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee, Wisconsin following the killing of 23-year-old African American Sylville K. Smith by an as yet unidentified African American police officer Saturday afternoon.

Approximately 100 people gathered Saturday night to protest near where Smith was killed. The night ended with a handful of nearby businesses looted as well as a gas station, a bank branch and an auto parts store torched. A handful of cop cars and other vehicles were damaged or destroyed. The police arrested 31 people during protests Saturday and Sunday night.

At the request of Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, a prominent African American backer of Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker has mobilized the National Guard. At least 100 members have been placed on standby to respond to protests if deemed necessary by city officials, adding to the 150 specially trained Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) officers and regular police patrols.

This marks the second time since 2014 that Walker has put the National Guard on notice for deployment in response to protests against police violence in the city. The National Guard, a branch of the military, has been used to put down popular protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and Baltimore, Maryland in 2015.

While the killing of Smith is the immediate cause of the protests in Milwaukee, it is clear that broader issues are involved—bound up not with racial divisions, but a one-sided class war waged by the American financial elite. Like so many cities in the United States, Milwaukee has been devastated by decades of deindustrialization and financialization, which has

produced the highest levels of inequality since the 1920s. The factories that provided decent wages and benefits for tens of thousands of workers have all but disappeared.

The city lost three-quarters of its industrial jobs between 1960 and the 2010. The disappearance of manufacturing employment had a particular impact on black male workers in the city. From 1970 to 2010, the employment rate for black men aged 16 to 64 in the metro Milwaukee region fell precipitously, from 73.4 percent to only 44.7 percent.

The city's overall poverty rate in 2014 was 29 percent, nearly double the national rate. Children and youth aged 18 and under were the worst affected, with more than 42 percent growing up poor. More than 43 percent of the population in the Sherman Park neighborhood lives below the poverty line.

It is fitting that President Barack Obama visited the Sherman Park area in 2012 where he spoke at the Master Lock factory, one of the few remaining industrial facilities in the area. Obama hailed Master Lock as a great example of the “insourcing” of low wage manufacturing jobs. In its more than seven years in office, the Obama administration has not proposed a single initiative or program that would begin to address the staggering levels of social inequality, poverty and unemployment in the United States.

The growth of poverty and inequality, the eruption of social anger and the build-up of the police forces are interrelated components of the same class dynamic. Whatever the role racism may play—a 2011 analysis of traffic stop data found that African American drivers were more than seven times as likely as white drivers to be pulled over by the MPD—the war waged by the American ruling class has been directed at the working class of all races.

In considering the issue of police violence, it is once again necessary to stress that the majority of those killed by police in the United States are white. As for the conditions that are fueling social anger, these transcend race as well. The majority of poor in the United States are white, and white workers have suffered some of the most disastrous declines in conditions of life over the past several decades. One only needs to cite the stunning rise in mortality rates among working class whites in recent years.

As for African Americans, one of the most significant if very little noted facts of American life is the extraordinary growth of social inequality within the African American population over the past four decades. A black family in the top 1 percent of the US population has a net worth 200 times the average black family, and the top 10 percent controls 67 percent of the wealth held by all African Americans.

In politics, African Americans have been elevated to positions of power by both the Democrats and Republicans—Obama, Loretta Lynch, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell being some of the most notable. Many major American cities have had black mayors and city councils are populated by African American politicians.

Those promoting racial politics speak for this social layer of more privileged sections of the middle class and for sections of the ruling class itself whose interests are thoroughly hostile to those of African American workers and youth.

A genuine fight against police violence must proceed from an understanding of certain basic facts.

First, that police violence is the product not of racial animosity of “white America” against “black America,” but rather is a reflection of the nature of the state as an instrument of class rule. The build-up of police power, which is a component part of a vast apparatus of repression, from the military to the spying agencies, will be used against all social opposition to the policies of the financial aristocracy.

Second, all factions of the political establishment are committed to the defense of the police. In the 2016 elections, Trump and the Republicans are running on a program of “law and order” and calls for criminalization of opposition to police violence (expressed most ruthlessly by Milwaukee County Sheriff Clarke at the Republican National Convention

last month).

Meanwhile Hillary Clinton and the Democrats hail the police while sickeningly and hypocritically exploiting the family members of the victims of police violence to promote racial identity politics. She is committed to continuing and extending the policies of the Obama administration—which means escalating the assault on the working class, expanding war abroad and doing nothing to halt the reign of police violence in the United States.

The fight against police violence means a fight against the society that creates it. It requires a political struggle to unify all sections of the working class, of all races, in a common fight against unemployment, poverty, inequality and the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact