

Milwaukee Democrats propose to dramatically increase size of police force following Sherman Park protests

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In response to the anti-police violence protests and unrest last month in the city's Sherman Park neighborhood, Milwaukee's Democratic mayor Tom Barrett and the Milwaukee Common Council announced a new safety budget on Friday which includes a dramatic funding increase for the Milwaukee police.

The budget contains authorization for expanding the Milwaukee Police Department by hiring 280 police officers in the next 2 years, adding seasonal officers, and detaining suspects "until their case is resolved" in lieu of electronic monitoring. Also proposed are more Milwaukee County sheriff patrols in county parks and expanded juvenile detention center capacities.

Recent years have seen an ever more intrusive and brutal police presence in the city. The Milwaukee County sheriffs have stationed a mobile command center, an RV containing surveillance equipment, at the popular Bradford Beach all summer long.

Milwaukee police officers made regular practice of using public body cavity and strip searches of suspects, leading to 50 defendants suing the city. Only one of three officers involved was convicted in 2014 on felony charges for the cavity search of a suspect that resulted in severe trauma.

Multiple instances of police violence in Milwaukee have given rise to repeated protests and mass anger. In 2014, police shot and killed Dontre Hamilton in a downtown park. He was mentally ill and homeless. Several large protests followed his death, including 1,200 who took to the streets following the announcement that the officer who killed Hamilton would not face federal criminal civil rights charges.

Seventeen people have been killed by police in

Wisconsin since the beginning of this year, three in the city of Milwaukee.

The shooting of Smith last month sparked a night of unrest and days of protests and saw the deployment of police SWAT teams, the mobilization of the National Guard and the implementation of a curfew in order to intimidate demonstrators.

Following the repeal of the curfew in late August, Republican governor Scott Walker announced \$4.5 million in funding for various projects in the city as a sop to local business interests, and which will have no impact on desperate social conditions.

Nearly half of this funding, \$2 million, is earmarked to demolish foreclosed properties and hire youth to help clean up the lots. The other funds are to be allocated to various job training initiatives, with Walker commenting, "This is all about helping people move from government dependence to true independence through the dignity that comes from work."

Local manufacturers have seized the opportunity to announce their own tentative plans to expand into the north side of Milwaukee. Tim Sullivan, former CEO of Bucyrus, now owned by Caterpillar, heads up REV Group, a new company seeking a government contract worth \$6.3 billion to build postal vehicles. Sullivan claims if they win the contract, they would open a plant on Milwaukee's Northside and hire 1,000 workers.

It can be expected that if such a venture gets off the ground, REV Group will provide residents the opportunity of working for poverty wages and scant benefits. When President Barack Obama visited the Master Lock plant in Sherman Park in 2012 he hailed it as a model for the "insourcing" of low-wage manufacturing jobs.

As the WSWS has noted, while racism no doubt plays a role in police shootings, the socioeconomic features of these shootings highlight the fundamental class character of police brutality. Even as the majority of the shootings in Milwaukee occurred in neighborhoods that are predominantly African-American, they are also areas that reflect the concentrated impact of the social and economic crisis of capitalism.

The city lost three-quarters of its industrial jobs between 1960 and 2010. As a result of this deindustrialization the city's child poverty rate is more than 40%, and overall poverty levels consistently lead the state.

The disappearance of manufacturing employment had a particularly severe 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 response of the political establishment to the protests in Milwaukee mirrors that of nearby Chicago, which is also experiencing popular protests against a recent spate of police killings. The two cities have been controlled by the Democratic Party for decades and share a history of deindustrialization.

The Democrats have responded to protests against police violence and desperate social conditions with an escalation of police presence in poor neighborhoods and increasing funding for a larger force and the further militarization of the police.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, and his appointee, police superintendent Eddie Johnson, have worked hand in hand to block justice for police murder victims and prevent the prosecution of officers.



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