

Police violence and the social crisis in America

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In Charlotte, North Carolina, protests continued on Friday over the brutal police killing of Keith Lamont Scott, 43. Local and state officials announced a curfew earlier this week and have deployed riot police using tear gas and the National Guard against demonstrators.

As political officials and the city's police department debate whether or not to release police video of the shooting in an effort to defuse social tensions, a nail in the coffin of official lies came Friday with the release of cell phone video shot by Scott's wife. Rakevia Scott can be heard pleading with police not to shoot her husband, shouting that he does not have a weapon, that he had a traumatic brain injury, and had just taken his medication. The video also shows Scott after the shooting, prone on the ground, without a gun at his feet as appeared in subsequent photos, suggesting that police may have planted evidence.

Both the killing of Scott and the protests in response to this killing starkly expose the deep social tensions and class divisions in America. The fact that these demonstrations erupt only six weeks before the presidential election underscores the deep alienation of masses of workers and youth from the entire pseudo-democratic electoral charade. Hundreds of workers and youth would not be in the streets if they believed that the upcoming elections will lead to a more just society.

Conditions in Charlotte are a microcosm of America as a whole. The "Queen City"—a main corporate center for Bank of America, Wachovia bank, Duke Energy and other companies—has been listed as among the "best places to live," celebrated as a beacon of progress and "growth" in the US South. However, this applies only to the rich and the privileged upper middle class.

Since 2000, the number of people in Charlotte living in poverty has doubled, from 159,000 to 314,000 (out of a total Metropolitan area population of 2.4 million). It is among the cities with the highest growth of concentrated poverty, with the census tracts deemed high poverty (poverty rates of more than 20 percent) rising from 19 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2014. A quarter of all

children in the city are poor, and a Harvard study found that poor children in Mecklenburg County have one of the lowest chances of escaping poverty of any county.

Similar conditions exist in cities throughout the United States. Eight years after the financial collapse of 2008, social inequality is at record levels. The Obama administration has overseen the funneling of trillions of dollars to the banks, with a corresponding inflation of the wealth of the super-rich. Millions of workers and young people face a future of unemployment, low-wage work, and soaring costs for housing, rent and other basic necessities.

In the two years since the killing of Michael Brown led to protests and a brutal crackdown by militarized police forces in Ferguson, Missouri, more than 2,000 people have lost their lives to police violence. Even the most casual interactions with police can end in violent arrest or death.

Despite all the protests, and despite nervous appeals from sections of the political establishment and media for some restraint to forestall social unrest, the killings continue, day after day, week after week. It becomes difficult to keep track of all the names added to the list of victims. This only demonstrates that there is something deep and organic involved, embedded in the structure of American society and politics.

Media commentators and Democratic Party officials proclaim that Scott's killing is another expression of the immense racial divide in America, with police killings a subset of the broader conflict between "white America" and "black America," between police departments and "communities of color."

Racism exists and, of course, frequently plays a role in police violence. However, those who seek to enforce a racist narrative ignore basic facts. To a degree unknown during the heyday of the civil rights movement a half-century ago, police departments and state institutions are racially integrated. The cop who allegedly shot Scott is African-American, as is the city's police chief, who has opposed calls for the release of the video. Many of the

political officials who run cities with the most brutal police violence (like Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, the mayor of Baltimore who chaired the Democratic National Convention and called protesters against the killing of Freddie Gray “thugs”) are African-American. And is it necessary to call attention to the racial background of the individual who has served as US president during the past seven and a half years of escalating police violence?

In the final analysis, police violence is a class issue. Consider some of the recent killings tabulated by the *Guardian* newspaper, one of the few media sources that have kept a systematic record of police violence in America. Each tells a story of social breakdown in one form or another, with the tragedies charting similar paths regardless of the race of the individual killed.

A disproportionate number of African-Americans are victims of police killings, but approximately one-half of the victims of police violence are white. To cite several cases that have occurred in the past ten days alone involving members of this supposedly “privileged” white demographic:

* Joshua Scott, 22, from Port St. Lucie, Florida, was killed on September 20 when police officers sought to involuntarily commit him for mental health treatment. He reportedly armed himself with a gun and was shot after a six-hour standoff.

* Jeremy Swenson, 30, from Logan, Utah, was killed on September 19. He was reportedly suicidal and was making “threatening actions” against another person, prompting police to shoot him dead.

* Jesse Beshaw, 29, of Winooski, Vermont, was shot seven times on September 16 by police who were serving him an arrest warrant. He was unarmed, but police claim he advanced toward them with an arm behind his back.

* Joseph Schlosser, 69, of Weeki Wachee, Florida, was killed on September 15. Police officers were responding to a 911 call from a health care worker who said that Schlosser, a military veteran, was suicidal. He was shot and killed in his home.

* Timothy McMillan, 38, of San Gabriel, California, was killed on September 14. McMillan was homeless and allegedly stole a police car. Unarmed, he died after being accosted and restrained by police at a McDonald’s restaurant.

The list goes on and on. Each of these stories, and many more like them, could be the subject of novels exploring the horrific consequences of social dislocation, inequality and war.

Police violence—like unemployment, poverty and all the

consequences of capitalism—affects workers of every race and background. It is this basic fact the purveyors of identity politics seek to cover up. Those who talk about “white privilege,” or claim that the United States is convulsed by racial hatred, are engaged in a conscious political fraud, aimed at concealing the class nature of the state and blocking what is the necessary precondition for any fight against police violence: the unity of the working class.

The epidemic of police murders is one symptom of a deeply dysfunctional society. The homilies of Obama and other government officials about American “democracy” cannot cloak the reality of a ruling class that operates with unparalleled violence at home and abroad. The United States is in the midst of an election campaign between a fascistic demagogue and a right-wing representative of the military-intelligence apparatus, competing with each other over who will represent the interests of the ruling class most ruthlessly. The contest between Trump and Clinton, as with the political establishment as a whole, appears separated by a vast gulf from social reality.

The global predations of the American ruling class have innumerable consequences, from the bombings carried out last weekend in New York, to the practice of torture and assassination, to the increasingly violent character of the political process itself.

In the videos that have come out of police killings, beatings and other atrocities, one is struck by the inhumanity of it all, the indifference to human life. It is not a matter fundamentally of individuals, but of the institutions of the state, that “body of armed men” acting in defense of the ruling class, in which the combination of war and social inequality is expressed in homicidal behavior.

The events in Charlotte over the past several days point to the social upheavals that are to come. The same capitalist crisis that produces war and social counterrevolution also produces class struggle. A way forward, however, can only be found through a conscious fight to unify all sections of the working class, of all races, to connect the fight against police violence to the fight against war, unemployment, poverty, inequality and the capitalist system that underlies it all.



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