

“Blue Lives Matter” law extends safeguards to police in Louisiana

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Louisiana’s new “Blue Lives Matter” law, signed into law last year by Democratic Party Governor John Bel Edwards, is already being used to provide cover for police and extend harsher penalties on the accused.

The so-called “Blue Lives Matter” bill effectively extends extra protections to police and public safety professionals under existing hate-crime laws. These laws, implemented in states throughout the country, are meant to dole out harsher penalties for crimes committed against citizens based on race, gender or religion. Louisiana is the first state to enact a law that includes police officers as a “protected class.”

Recent comments made by St. Martinville parish police chief Calder Hebert reveal the true extent to which this reactionary law will be used to persecute poor and working class citizens.

“Resisting an officer or battery of a police officer was just that charge, simply. But now, Governor Edwards, in the legislation, made it a hate crime now,” said Hebert. “We need the police and the public to work together. The policemen have a job. The public has the job of helping the police. And if someone happens to be involved in criminal activity, let the courts handle it. Don’t resist physically.”

The implications of increased penalties tacked onto the crime of “resisting arrest” sets a dangerous precedent, as this particular charge has long been abused to unjustly prosecute alleged criminals. For his part, Edwards has stated that resisting arrest does not specifically constitute a hate crime under the new law, but he has launched no investigation into Hebert’s statements and stands by the law as written.

Hebert’s words reflect a reactionary sentiment that is permeating the entire police apparatus in the United States, emboldened by the Trump administration. At his inauguration, Trump pledged to bring “law and order”

back to the United States. He has filled his cabinet with generals and billionaires to enact this vision. Laws like these are likely just the beginning as Republicans and Democrats work together to attack the working class.

This reactionary piece of legislation comes in direct response to the increased criticisms of police violence in the years following the death of Michael Brown in the hands of police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri.

Just last year in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the state’s capital, thousands of workers and youth took to the street in protest of the brutal murder of an unarmed man, Alton Sterling. These protests were met with harsh police crackdowns as dozens of peaceful demonstrators were arrested by heavily armed riot police, with at least one person saying he was beaten by police.

State representative Lance Harris wrote the bill partially in response to the murder of a Texas sheriff who was reportedly targeted by the gunman for wearing the uniform of a police officer. Since the killing of Michael Brown in August of 2014, police in the United States have killed over 2,000 people, whereas intentional violence against police officers in 2015 actually dropped by about 20 percent.

In Louisiana just last year, a New Iberia sheriff was charged for ordering deputies to beat incarcerated inmates and covering up the actions to avoid civil rights prosecution. Already in the United States, violence against police officers is heavily prosecuted. The death penalty is an all too common sentence given out to those found guilty of the rare police murder, and any kind of resistance to arrest is often met with violent police brutality.

In Louisiana, there already exists a system of penalties against assaulting police officers that is much

harsher than for any other form of assault. The writers of the bill admit that under these conditions the bill serves more of a psychological purpose, sending a message to the working class of Louisiana that dissent will be met with a brutal response by the state.

In 37 states, assault on public officials is already used as a “aggravating factor” in sentencing, with harsh penalties doled out against even the most minor of infractions against public officials. The Louisiana law is already serving as inspiration for other states to pass similar legislation, with Pennsylvania, Mississippi and Wisconsin officials drafting laws extending prosecution to offenders.

Wisconsin State Rep. David Steffen reportedly said, “So if an assault happens against a police officer, specifically because he’s a police officer, a judge and district attorney will have the opportunity to increase those penalties and prison times to appropriately punish those people. What it does is elevate specific actions against law enforcement to a hate crime.”

John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, was elected following the disastrous and reactionary Republican administration of Bobby Jindal. Since taking office, however, Edwards has continued the right-wing measures of the deeply unpopular Republicans, approving further cuts to education and health care access to millions of working class families in Louisiana.



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