

Race, class and the protests against police violence in St. Louis, Missouri

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The protests that erupted in St. Louis over the past two weeks, following the acquittal of police officer Jason Stockley for the killing of 24-year-old Anthony Lamar Smith in 2011, raise basic political issues.

The ruling class responded to the demonstrations, which drew as many as 1,000 people, with a ruthless and violent police crackdown, giving officers free rein to terrorize and intimidate the crowds. One chilling video circulating on social media shows groups of officers beating an unarmed protester with their batons before dragging his limp body out of sight. In another, a long line of riot police trample a 65-year-old woman who the police later claimed, “did not disperse quickly enough.”

The peaceful crowds were attacked with pepper spray and tear gas on multiple occasions. Well over 120 people were arrested, with many media reporters and bystanders caught up in the dragnet. So unrestrained was the level of police force that, at one point, they beat and bloodied one of their own officers who was undercover in the crowd.

Given the significance of the exoneration—despite overwhelming evidence of premeditated police murder—and the massive scale of the police riot, it is striking how little attention it has received from the publications of the “left” in the United States, which orbit around the Democratic Party. No articles can be found on either the website of Socialist Alternative or on Jacobin, which is associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The fact that the mayor overseeing the violent crackdown, Lyda Krewson, is a Democrat is no doubt a factor.

What has been written from these quarters predictably presents the issue of police brutality as wholly a product of “institutional racism” (Stockley is white and Lamar Smith was black). An article (“St. Louis refuses

to be silenced”) published September 22 on *Socialist Worker*, the online news organ of the International Socialist Organization, blames what it calls “racecraft cast upon Black people by police.” The words “race,” “racism” and “racist” appear seven times, while the word “class” does not appear once. The decision to exonerate the police officer is presented entirely as a matter of the judge’s own alleged racism.

The effort of pseudo-left groups to deliberately inject racialist politics into the popular protests found a revealing expression in an event staged on September 21, six days after the acquittal of Stockley—a rally under the headline, “Call to Action: White Allies Only.”

The protest, which unabashedly called for a segregated demonstration, was initiated by Cori Bush, a local pastor and activist currently planning a run for US Congress as a Democrat. The event was enthusiastically promoted and endorsed by the local chapter of the DSA and Black Lives Matter (BLM), and was led by a member of Socialist Alternative.

The fact that a segregated protest was orchestrated by political tendencies that posture as the “left” in St. Louis is particularly offensive given the city’s long history of working-class struggle and solidarity across racial lines. St. Louis is home to the first general strike in the United States in 1877. Born out the Great Railroad Strike of same year, the general strike was largely organized by the Workingman’s Party, which had ties to the First International, and was consciously aimed at uniting both black and white workers on the basis of their common class interests.

The “White Allies Only” event, in contrast, sought to reinforce racial divisions. Organizers led the crowd in chanting the slogan “white silence is violence!” The social media event page motivated the rally by arguing that systemic apathy of white Americans is a major

factor in the brutalization of black people by police. In other words, white people as a whole are responsible for the murder of Smith and other black Americans.

Similar rallies have been called during other protests over police violence throughout the country since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. A statement (“White Silence is the New Mob Violence”) published on the website of Black Youth Project, an affiliate of Black Lives Matter, in response to the 2012 killing of black youth Trayvon Martin declares, “The silence of our White friends, colleagues, family members, and partners around issues perpetrated by White people is not going unnoticed. It is the smothering, dead silence around such issues that gives platform for these types of atrocities to happen all around us.”

Among broader sections of the population, there is a general understanding that police violence is not a matter primarily of race. In contrast to the call for a segregation of black and white workers, earlier demonstrations in St. Louis attracted families, workers, and youth of all races and ethnicities. These events were dominated by chants like “No justice, No profits!” a spin on the commonly used slogan, “No justice, No peace!”

Whatever role racism may play in particular acts of police violence, the effort to present the epidemic of police violence as a matter of “white violence” is reactionary and false. The killing of Lamar Smith is just one instance of an unending string of police murders that kill hundreds of poor and working class people, of all races, every year in the United States.

While African Americans are disproportionately the target of police killings, the majority of victims are in fact white. According to conservative estimates from the *Washington Post*’s tally of police murders, 330 of those killed by police this year were white, while 160 were black.

This epidemic of police murders takes place under politicians from both parties and regardless of race. There are scores of examples of black police commissioners and black mayors—and black presidents—who oversee such murders, offer unconditional support to the police departments, and allow the exoneration of murderous cops.

The racist narrative obscures the class character of the state, which serves the corporate and financial elite,

regardless of race and ethnicity. It is a cover for the role of the Democratic Party, which has long promoted racial and identity politics even as it has overseen a policy that has produced social and economic devastation.

Above all, the politics of these groups serves to block what is required to oppose police violence and racism in all its forms—a united movement of the working class against the capitalist system.

Completely absent from the political strategy of those organizations that promote racist politics is any appeal to common social and class issues that face workers of all races: the destruction of education, the lack of health care, unemployment, skyrocketing inequality, unending war. No attempt is made to educate workers in the history of the 20th century, which provides countless examples of how racism is used by the ruling class to divide workers and prevent the emergence of a common struggle.

The exoneration of Stockley and the police mobilization in St. Louis should be taken as a warning to the entire working class: opposition to the policies of the ruling class will not be tolerated. It is not “white violence” that is responsible for police killings, but the ruling class, its political servants in the Democratic and Republican Parties, and the capitalist system that they defend.



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