The murder of Stephon Clark and the fight against police violence

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Over the last week, hundreds of people in Sacramento, California have participated in demonstrations protesting the police murder of Stephon Clark, a 22-year-old African American man who was unarmed when he was shot 20 times in his grandparent's backyard. Many more are expected to pay their respects today at Clark's funeral.

The eruption of renewed protests against police violence is part of the reemergence of social opposition in the US, including a wave of strikes and demonstrations by teachers and the March for Our Lives protests that involved more than one million students and youth last weekend.

Clark's murder was caught on video by the police officer's body cams and a police helicopter that was hovering overhead. The footage shows that the officers unleashed the barrage of bullets as soon as they rounded the corner of the house.

After gunning Clark down, the officers made no effort to administer any aid until backup arrived several minutes later, at which point they handcuffed his corpse and made a feeble attempt at CPR. Police video also shows that officers muted their microphones, presumably to get their story straight while off the record.

The release of the footage and the initial claims by the police that they mistook Clark's cellphone for a gun have sparked a week of demonstrations. Clark's family and protesters are demanding the arrest and prosecution of the two officers who murdered the unarmed man.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra's announcement on Tuesday that his office would provide oversight of the District Attorney's investigation into the killing and conduct its own investigation of the Sacramento Police Department's policies was met with justifiable skepticism by Clark's family.

There should be no illusions in promises of oversight or intervention from the Democrats and their supporters in Black Lives Matter. Longtime Democratic operative Al Sharpton, representing the political establishment, is delivering the eulogy at Clark's funeral today as part of an effort to demobilize the protests and redirect popular anger back into the electoral politics of the Democratic Party. At the funeral for 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014, Sharpton chided protesters to "respect the police" and stop throwing "ghetto pity parties."

Meanwhile, members of BLM and other proponents of identity politics in Sacramento have worked to direct anger away from the city's first African American police chief, promoting the idea that investigations by the state and federal government will hold Clark's killers to account.

Such official investigations, whether at the state or federal level, are meant to tamp down popular anger while providing cover for the police. They rarely, if ever, result in charges against killer cops. Even rarer are criminal convictions, which are little more than statistical anomalies.

Dozens of investigations by the Department of Justice during the Obama administration into the actions of police departments across the country served to whitewash the crimes of countless police officers.

Even as protests continued in Sacramento, Louisiana's Attorney General Jeff Landry announced that there would be no murder charges against the two police officers who shot and killed Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge as he sold CDs outside a convenience store. That egregious killing, in which two officers pumped bullets into Sterling as he was held down on the ground, was also caught on video.

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Clark's murder is just one of a relentless string of police killings in the US, which have continued unabated after popular protests over police violence erupted in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 following the murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown. Since the beginning of this year, more than 300 people have been killed by police nationwide, well on track to surpass the yearly average of 1,175 killings over the last four years.

The Trump administration has repeatedly denounced demonstrations against police violence, including last year's protests by players in the National Football League, in effect giving police a green light to beat and kill with impunity. But Trump is only intensifying policies pursued under the Obama administration, which presided over the imposition of militarized police crackdowns on demonstrators in Ferguson and Baltimore, and repeatedly sided with the police in cases brought before the Supreme Court.

Contrary to the narrative promoted by Black Lives Matter and the political establishment that police violence is an issue of "race relations," the largest share of those killed by the police are white. Whatever role racism plays in the disproportionate number of African American men killed each year, working-class people of every skin color, gender and age are the victims of police brutality.

Police violence is only the most visible expression of the brutal character of class relations within the United States under capitalism. The police, constituting one of the "bodies of armed men" that make up the state, are tasked with defending the existing social order in a country in which three people control as much wealth as the bottom half of society.

The ongoing reign of police terror is just one expression of the escalating crackdown on democratic rights within the United States. The Trump administration has let loose Immigration and Customs Enforcement to carry out raids at workplaces, schools and hospitals throughout the country, terrorizing whole communities and deporting hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants. Meanwhile the technology giants, working at the behest of the major US intelligence agencies and the Democratic Party, are moving rapidly to censor the internet.

It is no surprise that renewed demonstrations against police violence have erupted amid the growth of working-class opposition in the United States, with a wave of strikes and protests by education workers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, as well as nationwide demonstrations against school shootings.

The emergence of these struggles makes clear that social opposition is building up within the working class. But at every turn, workers confront the efforts of the Democratic Party and trade unions to shut down and demobilize popular opposition by channeling it back into the political establishment.

Every social problem, whether it is underfunded schools, low wages, unending police violence or school shootings, has systemic roots. The struggle against police violence can only succeed to the extent that workers and young people break with the Democratic Party and link their struggles to the broader movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism.

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