

Police murder in Memphis

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The brutal murder on Wednesday of 20-year-old Brandon Webber by US federal marshals is the latest eruption of police violence in a country where youth and workers are gunned down on the streets by uniformed killers with numbing regularity.

Webber, the father of three and a student at the University of Memphis, was, according to eyewitnesses, shot up to 20 times after he had been handcuffed and subdued by marshals who had come to his home to serve felony arrest warrants. Webber, an African American, was the third victim of homicidal police violence in Memphis so far this year.

Just two days before, in the far northeastern corner of Tennessee, a young white man was killed by police in a strikingly similar manner. Police went to the home of Terry Frost, 32, in rural Sullivan County to serve him with an arrest warrant. As with Webber, police claim that Frost used his vehicle as a weapon as he attempted to escape. Sheriff's deputies opened fire and killed him.

Between the killing of Frost on Monday and that of Webber on Wednesday, it was announced Tuesday that the Memphis police officer videotaped last year killing unarmed Terrance Carlton, 25, as he lay on the ground in a fetal position, will face no criminal charges.

On Wednesday evening, heavily armed Memphis riot police attacked several hundred angry residents of the Frayser neighborhood where Webber was killed, firing tear gas into the faces of unarmed youth and workers. Three people were arrested, including one who was charged with inciting a riot.

The media emphasized the claims of the authorities that 25 police officers were injured, none seriously, by rocks and bottles thrown by protesters. Mayor Jim Strickland, a Democrat, told a local television station that a "violent response" to any police shooting was "absolutely unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

Every year in America, some 1,000 people,

overwhelmingly working class, are killed by police. According to a database compiled by the *Washington Post*, Webber's death is the 406th police killing so far in 2019.

It is just short of five years since the police chokehold killing of Eric Garner in New York and the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri sparked a wave of protests across the country. But in the subsequent years, the toll of police killings has only risen.

The conditions in Memphis, a city of 650,000 people, and particularly in the Frayser neighborhood, exemplify the underlying economic and social conditions behind the reign of police violence in working class communities throughout the United States. In 2011, the Census Bureau declared Memphis "the poorest big city in America." Median household income in the city is \$38,826, and the poverty rate is 26.9 percent.

In Frayser, the poorest neighborhood in Memphis, the corresponding figures are \$31,065 and 44.8 percent.

Like scores of US cities, Memphis was hit by factory closures in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving communities such as Frayser economically devastated, with nothing but the toxic waste left behind by shuttered plants to serve as a reminder of vanished jobs.

Police violence is an expression of the acute class contradictions that permeate a society dominated, behind the increasingly tattered trappings of democracy, by a wealthy and criminal corporate-financial oligarchy. The police serve as a front line of state repression in a country where the richest three billionaires have more wealth than the bottom 175 million Americans combined, and where the entire political establishment and both of its major parties are focused on propping up the stock market by pumping trillions more into Wall Street, paid for by slashing jobs, wages, pensions, health care and education.

A quarter-century of endless war abroad, waged to

protect the global interests of the oligarchs, has its domestic counterpart in the militarization of the police. Billions of dollars' worth of military hardware—tanks, helicopters, armored vehicles, drones—has been handed over to state and local police departments in recent decades. Like the redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of society, the process has been presided over by Democrats no less than Republicans.

The Trump administration has formally adopted a policy of preparing for war against America's "great power" competitors, beginning with China and Russia. The strategists of this policy speak of "total war," involving centrally the militarization of the home front and suppression of social and political opposition. Hence Trump's open encouragement of the police to "get tough" and his setting up of concentration camps for immigrants. The Democrats remain virtually silent on the persecution of immigrants, while overwhelmingly voting for massive increases in Pentagon spending.

With the police killing in Memphis and the eruption of protests, the purveyors of racial politics are once again seeking to obscure the fundamental class questions underlying police brutality and present the issue as purely a racial matter. Pamela Moses, founder of Memphis Black Lives Matter and a candidate for mayor, told *Time* magazine that police "are supposed to be trained to apprehend without deadly force, but when it comes to us, we always have to die."

As a matter of fact, more whites are killed by police than blacks, although the latter, along with Hispanics, are killed at a disproportionate rate. According to the *Washington Post* list, of the 181 police killings so far this year in which the race of the deceased is known, 82 were white, 52 were black and 44 Hispanic. Astonishingly, police killings have taken place in 46 of the 50 states, including in such largely rural, sparsely populated and overwhelmingly white states such as Vermont and Wyoming. What the vast majority of victims of police violence have in common is not their race, but that they are working class.

While racism no doubt plays a role in police attacks on minorities, the basic reason that blacks and Hispanics are so frequently victimized is that they make up a disproportionate percentage of the most impoverished and oppressed sections of the working class. With few exceptions, it is not wealthy blacks and

Hispanics who are subjected to police terror.

The role of racial and other forms of identity politics is to divert attention from the real source of police violence and repression, as well as poverty, inequality and war, i.e., the capitalist system. Politically, it serves to divide the working class and channel social opposition behind the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, the military-intelligence complex and privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

It was the African American, Democratic President Barack Obama who expanded the program of military arms to the police and repeatedly intervened on the side of the police when challenged in court for illegal and unconstitutional violations of civil liberties. Under Obama's watch, with only the rarest exceptions, killer cops got away with murder without even being charged. Trump bases his naked support for police violence on the foundations laid down by his predecessor.

The police are part of what Engels called the "special bodies of armed men" that comprise the capitalist state. They cannot be reformed by adding more minorities or more civilian oversight. The state is not a neutral body. It is the repressive arm of the ruling class.

Under conditions of mounting economic, social and political crisis of the capitalist system in the US and internationally, and a growing movement of the American and world working class against social inequality, the ruling elite in the US and every other country is turning more and more openly to dictatorial forms of rule.

Youth and workers who want to fight against the plague of police violence and murder must turn to the growing movement of workers of all races and nationalities—to the teachers, health care workers, industrial workers who are striking in the greatest numbers in decades—and fight to unite them on the basis of a struggle for genuine equality and democracy under socialism.



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