

New York police brutality continues unabated in midst of pandemic

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Workers and young people in New York City and around the world have been outraged by the New York Police Department's brutal arrests of working people for violations of the city's coronavirus social distancing ordinance. A number of these arrests were recorded by passers-by on smart phones, and the documentation of police violence has led to an outpouring of anger on social media.

One video shows the arrest of a young black man, Stephon Scott, who is punched in the head while being restrained by three police officers. Scott and a group of friends were on a stoop when approached by three officers. The same officer who punches Scott then approaches the individual filming the incident, draws out a can of pepper spray and flicks open his baton. The officer aggressively approaches the man with the smart phone, waves his baton and tells him to go inside. Referring to the man being arrested, he says, "Do you wanna go with him?"

Another shows the seemingly unprovoked assault of Donni Wright. Wright, a ten-year-veteran groundskeeper for New York City Housing Authority, was viciously assaulted as he passed by a marijuana arrest near a delicatessen on Avenue D in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. While Wright was on the ground and handcuffed, the officer continued to strike him, resulting in injuries to Wright's spine, ribs and wrist.

The officer who carried out the attack, Francisco Garcia, was still on active patrol despite being named in at least seven lawsuits throughout his career, which have cost the city at least \$200,000 to settle. Following the attack on Wright, Garcia's only punishment was to be placed on "modified assignment."

Wright was initially charged with assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest. Only after a mass outpouring of anger online did the New York District Attorney's office defer the charges.

According to Wright's mother, speaking in an interview with the *New York Post*: "He [Wright] was trying to guide this young lady. And this is the type of person he is. He does his job and he loves working, and now, with this going on, he can't do anything. He can't lift."

Of Garcia, she said, "It was just a chilling feeling to see someone just take pure advantage, someone that is supposed to securing and protecting us."

In a further incident, the New York Police Department (NYPD) attacked an impromptu memorial of around 50 people for a rapper, William Daniels, who died from COVID-19 complications in Queens last week. One observer, CJ Wojtkowski, described the military-style operation on Twitter: "At least 30, maybe 40 cops plus special operations are crowded in Queensbridge Park, plus 20 cop cars and a couple of helicopters."

The attacks in New York City have coincided with revelations of police violence and state cover-up for murder in Georgia and Indiana, which have sparked anger across the US.

These distressing images have been counterposed in the corporate media and on social media to photographs of police officers handing out free masks at parks in wealthier areas of the city in Manhattan and Williamsburg. Many of the photographs show large groups of people tightly packed and often without masks or gloves.

No one should be arrested for actions that are the product of ignorance of the threat posed by the virus. The increasingly relaxed attitude of many toward social distancing restrictions is itself the product of a coordinated campaign by the media and politicians to "soften" the horrific reality of the ongoing pandemic and prepare for a return to work.

The socialist response to violations of social distancing is not a punitive one, but a coordinated effort to educate the public, provide full economic support for workers and

provide mass testing, contact-tracing and quarantining, and free and equal care for all those infected. The Socialist Equality Party advocates the establishment of neighborhood committees made up of workers and young people to monitor safety measures while facilitating outdoor exercise wherever it can be safely carried out.

Police brutality is a permanent feature of working class life in New York City and across the US. It is no accident, however, that the latest wave of NYPD thuggery has been occurred during the pandemic. The ruling elite understands that it must build up the powers of state in preparation for the huge attacks on the working class that will be undertaken in the coming weeks and months and the social opposition that will result. The trillions handed over to Wall Street must be paid for, and the bill falls at the door of the working class.

The NYPD's militarized response to seemingly minor incidents, such as the memorial that took place in Queensbridge Park, is preparation for the role it will play as workers begin to fight back.

The response of the Democratic Party has been efforts to divert attention from the basic class issues underlying the police attacks and focus exclusively on racial disparities between the NYPD's victims and the city's broader population. Since the COVID-19 restrictions were put in place six weeks ago, the NYPD has issued 374 social distancing-related summonses. Of these, 304 have been issued to individuals who are black or Hispanic.

There is a similar trend in social distancing-related arrests between March 16 and May 5. Across the city, there were at least 120 arrests for violating social distancing. Of those arrested, 29 were Hispanic and 82 were black.

On May 7, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio tweeted: "The disparity in the numbers does NOT reflect our values. We HAVE TO do better and we WILL." In the same tweet, de Blasio suggested that the police needed to arrest people and issue summons to save lives.

Hakeem Jeffries, a Democratic congressman from Brooklyn, said of the disproportionately high number of blacks and Hispanics arrested, "We can't unleash a new era of overly aggressive policing of communities of color in the name of social distancing." New York City's Public Advocate Jumaane Williams called the disparity "abysmal."

On the same day, the *New York Times*, in an article focusing on the 40 social distancing arrests in Brooklyn, noted, "More than a third of the arrests were made in the predominantly black neighborhood of Brownsville. No

arrests were made in the more white Brooklyn neighborhood of Park Slope."

While racism was likely a factor in these arrests and plays a role in police brutality in New York and elsewhere, efforts by the Democrats and the media to present these assaults as leveled exclusively against "communities of color" and "predominantly black neighborhoods" are disingenuous and cynical. As they well know, New York's working class is disproportionately black and Hispanic. Representing a faction of the capitalist class, the Democrats' framing of these attacks in purely racial terms is an attempt to distract workers from society's fundamental division: class.

Consider, for example, the *Times*'s discussion of arrests in the Brownsville and Park Slope neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Twenty-three percent of Park Slope's inhabitants are black and Hispanic, the *Times* notes, and 81 percent of the population in Brownsville is black and 6 percent is Hispanic.

However, the *Times*' report makes no mention of the huge disparity in income between the two neighborhoods. While an average Brownsville household brings home \$43,099 each year, the average household in the "more white" Park Slope earns \$167,058. If race were the sole focus of the NYPD, then how does one explain the ability of Park Slope's more wealthy black community to escape the department's yoke?

The bankruptcy of the racist response to these arrests is also confirmed by the demographics of the police officers carrying out the attacks. The NYPD proudly describes itself as "the most diverse police department in the country." In the department's 2019 enforcement report, it stated that 47.5 percent of cops were white, 15.2 percent were black, 28.8 percent were Hispanic and 8.5 percent were Asian.

As the WSWS's May 12 Perspective on the brutal murder of Ahmaud Arbery explained, "Racism and national chauvinism, along with the racist politics of the Democratic Party, are used as instruments of class rule, to divert social tensions and block the development of a united movement of the entire working class."



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