

Police violence and class rule

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It is now just over three weeks since the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd set off mass protests throughout the United States and around the world. The political representatives of the ruling class have responded with, on the one hand, brute force and threats of military repression, and, on the other hand, pledges of “reform” and “accountability.”

Yesterday, Trump signed an executive order that would embed more social workers and mental health professionals with the police, create a national database to track officers fired or convicted for using excessive force, and ban chokeholds, with the exception, as the president explained, of “when an officer’s life is at risk.”

Trump announced his executive order in an address before police officers filled with calls for “law and order” and denunciations of protesters. Trump’s caveat on chokeholds leaves the window wide open for the continued use of the deadly practice, since police officers routinely claim that they fear for their lives when they grievously wound or kill someone.

The Democrats have offered up their own slate of cosmetic changes largely mirroring Trump’s, including banning chokeholds and creating a national database of abusive officers, while also explicitly rejecting the demand, popular among protestors, to “defund” the police. Former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democrats’ presumptive presidential nominee, has called for \$300 million in additional federal funding to shore up police departments across the country, while Senator Bernie Sanders has said that cops need to be paid higher salaries.

Such measures will amount to less than nothing. They might as well propose to change the color of police uniforms. Inevitably, “reforms” from these representatives of the ruling class will end up strengthening the police as an oppressive apparatus of the state.

The promise of police reform has repeatedly been offered up by the ruling class as a supposed solution to excessive violence. In the aftermath of the urban rebellions of the 1960s, the Democrats claimed that more black police officers on the beat, more black police chiefs overseeing forces and more black mayors would solve the problem.

Half a century later, African Americans account for more than 13 percent of police officers, a proportional representation compared to the population as a whole. Black police chiefs head departments across the country, and cities large and small

have elected black mayors. In the last decade, the introduction of police vehicle dash cams and body cameras has been offered up as yet another panacea.

And yet the killing and abuse continue, and indeed have escalated.

What is absent from all of the media commentary on police violence, let alone the statements from bourgeois politicians, is any examination of what the police are and their relationship to capitalist society.

The uniform explanation of police violence as a manifestation of racism fails to explain anything. Of course, there is racism in the police. Fascistic sentiments are ubiquitous among the layers recruited into the police forces. However, the victims of police violence are the poor and oppressed of all races. Even as the protests are unfolding, the killing goes on—including of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, Georgia, who was black, and Hannah Fizer in Sedalia, Missouri, who was white.

The police function not as an instrument of racial oppression, but as an instrument of class rule. Since Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, it is worth recalling the role of the police 86 years ago in beating strikers participating in the Minneapolis general strike of 1934.

This is only one example of many. In every major class battle and social conflict in America, from the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Haymarket Massacre of 1886 to the historic Arizona Phelps Dodge strike of copper miners in 1983-85, workers have confronted in the police the instrument for enforcing the “legality” of the ruling class. A fresh upsurge of strike activity will certainly see cops playing their classic role, i.e., attacking picket lines. And in another historic example of the traditional function of police in upholding capitalist law, protestors, who have recently had the opportunity to witness cops in action, should recall the infamous Chicago police riot of 1968. Thousands of anti-Vietnam War protestors were brutally beaten as they demonstrated outside the Democratic National Convention.

As social inequality and class tensions have grown over the past four decades, the size and budgets of the police have grown proportionately. The police account for between 20 and 45 percent of discretionary funding in the budgets of major US cities. Overall, spending on the police stands at \$115 billion, up from \$42 billion 40 years ago, in inflation-adjusted terms.

Federal police funding, including for the FBI and for grants to

state and local police agencies, has increased more than five-fold during the same period. Since 1980, total spending on police and related institutions has risen from one percent of national income to two percent, while spending on welfare programs has fallen from one percent to 0.8 percent.

Police forces, moreover, are increasingly integrated with the military, the instrument of American imperialist domination abroad. Some \$7 billion in military equipment has been transferred to local police forces over the past two decades. When Trump calls protesters “domestic terrorists,” he is merely extending the logic of the “war on terror” to opposition within the United States. The scenes of paramilitary SWAT teams toting assault rifles and driving in armored vehicles to confront protesters have all the hallmarks of an occupying force.

While the scale of police killings in the US is unique among the advanced economies, police brutality is a universal phenomenon.

Brazil, where corrupt police rampage through the country’s impoverished favelas, routinely leads the world in police brutality, killing several thousand every year. In the Philippines, thousands of poor workers have fallen victim to fascist president Rodrigo Duterte’s “war on drugs.”

In France, the full force of the state has been unleashed on the predominantly white “Yellow Vest” protestors, as well as African immigrants protesting for equality. Further east, police in Hungary are the subject of nearly 1,000 complaints of excessive force every year, without any significant consequences for the offending officers.

Sizeable protests against police violence and in solidarity with George Floyd have broken out in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, countries where the police forces are notoriously brutal. Hundreds are killed every year by state security forces in each country. One report from BBC News in April notes that “security forces kill more Nigerians than COVID-19:”

At least 1,476 people were killed by state actors in the country over the past year, says the Council on Foreign Relations. In its report about Nigeria’s coronavirus lockdown period, the NHRC, a government agency, said it had found “8 separate incidents of extrajudicial killings leading to 18 deaths.”

How is this to be explained by racism? The international character of police violence—along with the proliferation of such violence in cities overseen by black police chiefs and black mayors—refutes the racialist narrative—the claim that what is involved in the US is the oppression of “black America” by “white America.”

Police violence is bound up with the character of capitalist society. The particular brutality of the police in the United

States is to be explained by the particular brutality of class relations in America, the land of inequality and the home of the financial oligarchy.

In his *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, written in 1884, Friedrich Engels provided the classic Marxist explanation of the state. The state, he wrote, is “by no means a power forced on society from without...”

Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel.

A central distinguishing feature of the state, Engels continued, is the establishment of a “public power,” which “consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds... It [the public power] grows stronger... in proportion as class antagonisms within the state become more acute, and as adjacent states become larger and more populous.”

That is, the state is not a neutral arbiter. It, and with it, the “institutions of coercion of all kinds” are political instruments of the ruling class, which arise because of the irreconcilability of class interests.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for the abolition of the police. But the abolition of the police is bound up with the abolition of class society. Nothing will be changed with the skin color of the cops or the racial background of city authorities, nor with this or that token reform.

An end to police violence and the defense of democratic rights require the mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally, to abolish the capitalist state, expropriate the ruling oligarchs and establish democratic control over economic life on the basis of social need and not private profit. That is, it requires a socialist revolution.



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